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Does the Internet Have an Unconscious?

Slavoj Žižek and Digital Culture

Clint Burnham

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Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in the United States of America 2018

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Burnham, Clint, 1962- author.
Title: Does the Internet have an unconscious? : Slavoj Žižek and digital culture / Clint Burnham.
Description: New York, NY : Bloomsbury Publishing, [2018] |
Series: Psychoanalytic horizons | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017051452 (print) | LCCN 2017054655 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781501341311 (ePDF) | ISBN 9781501341304 (ePUB) |
ISBN 9781501341298 (hardback : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Žižek, Slavoj. | Internet–Philosophy. | Digital media–Philosophy.
Classification: LCC B4870.Z594 (ebook) | LCC B4870.Z594 B85 2018 (print) |
DDC 199/.4973–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017051452

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-4129-8
ePDF: 978-1-5013-4131-1
eBook: 978-1-5013-4130-4

Series: Psychoanalytic Horizons

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

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This book is for Jeff Derksen, who knows I only do psychoanalysis because I have to.

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to Mari Ruti for the early interest in this book; your belief in the project (your enjoyment of the symptom?) made it happen. Thanks as well to Haaris Naqvi and Katherine De Chant at Bloomsbury New York for the editorial stewardship, and to Vinita Irudayaraj at Integra in Puducherry for the copyediting and production. Special thanks to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript. Thank you of course to Slavoj, Todd, and Anna for the generous blurbs.

Chapter 1 appeared, in different form, in the proceedings of the first conference of the Canadian Network for Psychoanalysis and Culture (CNPC): *The Freudian Legacy Today* (2015). Thank you to the anonymous reviewers, and to the conference organizers: Dina Georgis, Sara Matthews, and James Penney.

A shorter version of Chapter 2 appeared in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader*, eds. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis. London: Palgrave, 2013. Thank you to Matthew and Louis-Paul especially for the comradely edits.

A version of Chapter 6 was first published as the article "Love and Sex in the Age of Capitalist Realism: On Spike Jonez's *Her*" by Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham from *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 25–45. Copyright © 2017 by the University of Texas Press. All rights reserved. Thank you to the anonymous reviewers for their comments, and, again, to Matthew for the team effort.

A version of Chapter 7 is forthcoming in *After Lacan*, ed. Ankhi Mukherjee. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Thank you to Ankhi for the comradely edits, to the anonymous reviewer for the push to sharpen my discussion of the fragility of the big Other, and to Anna Kornbluh for the assist.

Talks from the material in this book were delivered at the Department of English, Simon Fraser University (Vancouver), the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (Kitchener), CNPC (University of Toronto), the Centre for Theory and Criticism (Western University), Incredible Machines (Vancouver), the International Žižek Studies Conference (Cincinnati), What is Documentary? (Portland), the University of Rijeka (Croatia), CAMRI at the University of Westminster (London), LaConference 2015 (Vancouver), and the LACK conference (Colorado Springs). Thanks to the organizers and audiences, and especially to Kelly Wood, Joshua Schuster,

Mohammed Salemy, Katarina Peović Vuković, Christian Fuchs, Todd McGowan, and members of the Vancouver Lacan Salon. Thank you as well to the Urban Subjects collective for the Vienna residency, to my SFU colleagues in the Department of English, the Centre for Global Political Economy, Institute for the Humanities, and Office for Community Engagement. Thank you also to my students. Thanks to Alois Sieben for the index. Thanks, finally, to the anonymous reviewers on ratemyprofessors.com, who pointed out that I am an ageing hipster who tries to apply Lacan to everything: they *are* my sinthome!

List of Abbreviations

ADB	*Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors.* London: Penguin, 2016.
AR	*Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism.* London: Verso, 2014.
CHU	Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left.* London: Verso, 2000.
Disparities	London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
Event	London: Penguin, 2014.
EYS!	*Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out.* London: Routledge, 1992.
FTKNWTD	*For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor. 2nd Ed*. London: Verso, 2008.
FTTF	*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce.* London: Verso, 2009.
IR	*Interrogating the Real*, ed. Rex Butler. London: Bloomsbury, 2005.
LA	*Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.
LtN	*Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism.* London: Verso, 2012.
ME	*Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality.* London: Verso, 1994.
PF	*The Plague of Fantasies. 2nd Ed.* London: Verso, 2008.
PV	*The Parallax View.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.
SO	*The Sublime Object of Ideology. 2nd Ed.* London: Verso, 2008.
TS	*The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology.* London: Verso, 1999.

Introduction

This book is both an introduction to the work of Slavoj Žižek and a way to use his ideas to think about the digital present. My thesis throughout is that we need the unique combination of German Idealism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Marxist materialism to be found in Žižek's thought to understand how the Internet, social and new media, and digital cultural forms work—how they work in our lives, how their failure to work structures our pathologies and fantasies, and how our failure to properly understand—our misrecognition of—the digital is constitutive of the political (it is where we organize and what we abandon to organize "in real life" [IRL]), of the aesthetic (which is to say, art in the age of the digital simulacra), and of the psychosexual (the smartphone, nestled next to our genitals or wallet, as the site of trolls, passwords, lovers, and "sexts"). But it works in the other direction, as well: we need the Internet, digital culture, social media, and smartphones, to understand Žižek; to understand how his thought is structured; how his books work; how his reputation, controversies, and ideas circulate, are debated, disagreed with, dismissed—but never ignored.

The two parts of this book's title, then, need to be given equal weight: the Internet, and the unconscious. And by the Internet, as my audiences have reminded me a few times, I mean everything digital (our use of digital devices, including laptop computers and mobile devices especially), everything social media, and also the often-invisible machinery on which the Internet "runs"—the servers, stacks, tubes, and bandwidth. The Internet is also cultural—both in the sense of digital culture—from the "digitization of everything", or the way that most images, sounds, and objects we encounter are now either part of the Internet or have had a digital role in their creation—to the form that the digital plays in our imagination, from our frustration at getting Wi-Fi or downloading a large file to misconceptions on the availability (or nonavailability) of digital streams globally.

Then, the unconscious: this is both a specific, Freudian-Lacanian use of the term, referring as it does to questions of whether the digital realm has a repressed, or extimate, or unknown Real, but also a metonymic reference to such tropes of post-Lacanian theory as *jouissance*, the *sinthome*, and lack. First of all, our relationship to the digital is phenomenological and

psychoanalytic, it is libidinal, and it has to do with anxiety, with neuroses, with fetishes. To think about the digital in a psychoanalytic way means to think about it spatially (following Žižek, also social, in terms of dialectical materialism).

All culture is now digital—the digital is the totality—and so the primary objects that I work through in this study, along with various instances of theory, are cultural objects. Thus, procedural novels (Ian Rankin, Jo Nesbø, and Steig Larsson), but also novels by Tao Lin, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, and Agatha Christie, Lena Dunham's memoir, a poem by John Ashbery, and lyrics by Chance the Rapper and Frank Ocean. These texts, mostly popular, are read first as instances of digital tropes and themes (from Chance's "rice and black beans/went into Apple store for a cracked screen" to Ashbery's proto-Selfie poem "Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror") but also for how they stage the digital ontologically—Dunham's shriek at discovering pebbles in her sister's vagina, Lin's novel that breaks into live tweeting.

Then, films such as *The Act of Killing, Searching for Sugar Man, Once Upon a Time in the West, Her, Stalker, Ex Machina*, and *This Is Forty* are watched in terms of how they stage or frame such Žižekian themes as "diseventalization" (can anything be more disheartening than watching the insouciant murderers in *The Act of Killing?*) or the sexual nonrelationship (*Her* as test case for a new "multiculturalism of computers") or even the way in which the digital stains the excremental (*This Is Forty*).

And then contemporary (mostly) art by Thomas Hirschhorn, Laura Owens, Hito Steyerl, Dara Birnbaum, Pierre Huyghe, Martha Rosler, Chto Delat, Caravaggio, Milija Pavićević, Šejla Kamerić, Tanja Ostojić, Sanja Iveković, Tim Lee, Jeff Wall, John Gerrard, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Works by these artists may be a way of helping us to think about Žižek's Balkan body (Kamerić, Ostojić …) or reverse-engineering the Selfie (Lee) or the very different roles that the finger, the *digital* haptic, plays in relation to the body (Hirschhorn, Caravaggio, and Mapplethorpe).

A certain triangulation therefore is on offer here: contemporary cultural production, it is proposed, is the most promising way in which to find the digital terrain to be theorized via psychoanalysis. Or, rather, digital culture exists in these filmic, textual, and visual forms—again, once we know how to read them, how to look at them or listen to them. I propose to discuss those cultural forms for how they represent the digital present, but also to argue that they can be interpreted to understand our relationship with the digital. For the digital is not the digital per se, but is a figure for the historical present, for the coming-into-being of, perhaps, a new sociality. And so, too, it can be worthwhile to investigate the most mundane, everyday aspects of the Internet, our "distractions" by gifs or status updates or cracked smartphone

screens (just as, in an earlier period, Freud said we should pay attention to our dreams, to mistakes, to jokes). In some ways, this is all a long way of saying that the Internet is a text.

Three motifs, then: the digital neighbor, fragile absolute, and dialectics of lack. And rather than describing or developing these concepts directly, perhaps an argument on how this book's project can be aligned with the "problem child" of the left: the public persona of Slavoj Žižek.

A leftist plea for not tolerating refugees—and a Facebook story

While it is dangerous for an academic book—which typically takes more than a year from its writing to its publication—to engage with current events, it is worth checking my claims with respect to the dialectics of Žižek and the Internet in two recent, and perhaps notorious, instances of Žižek's arguments in popular conversations: I am referring first to his various statements about refugees, culminating in his book *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors*, and then to his supposed endorsement of US presidential candidate Donald Trump before the 2016 election, followed by his argument that Trump's election is not as bad as would have been Hillary Clinton's. Both sets of statements seem, for Žižek even, to be beyond the pale of radical leftist thought. Support of refugees—whether from the Syrian and other Middle Eastern conflicts or in terms of the thousands who attempt to cross from Northern Africa to Italy—is the *ne plus ultra* of good-thinking social democrats, if only because of the opposition to same on the part of the populist rightists in Europe, let alone the ethical demands of multiculturalism, empathy for the disadvantaged and the poor, and so on. But Žižek's book's subtitle offers a clue to the contours of his thinking, as well as possible connections to this book's arguments. Žižek is thinking of refugees and migrants in terms of the Freudian-Lacanian concept of the "neighbor," or the *Nebenmensch*, the proximate other, who is such a threat to us. We are told to love the neighbor, Freud declared in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, because it is so hard. Because, Lacan argues, his *jouissance* is a threat to our own. Because, Žižek adds, we do not like our own enjoyment. Žižek's argument here is twofold: first, we have to recognize that sentimental attachments to romantic conceptions of the migrant or refugee do a disservice to those migrants as well as underestimate the true difficulties of assimilation, settlement, and the like. Further, the focus on refugees is a convenient way of ignoring the West's imperial role

in promulgating "failed states," war-torn regions, climate change, and other etiologies of disaster. But key here is the concept of the neighbor, of how the other as neighbor (which is to say not the living concrete person next to me, the Muslim or the right winger or the transperson, but that category of the other) is fundamentally different, that this real difference is itself inhuman, and that our only solution to such difference is the universality of alienation, of indifference—*which is our own inhumanity.* True universality, Žižek declares, is not a humanist universality of anodyne understanding; rather, it is "a universality of 'strangers', of individuals reduced to the abyss of impenetrability in relating not only to others but also to themselves" (*ADB*, 83).[1] And it is precisely this dialectic of proximity and indifference that is called for by the digital, by what I later in this book call the "digital neighbor," or the way in which social media and the Internet promise this closeness *that we do not even want.*

Consider the Frank Ocean song "Facebook story," which is a narrative by the producer SebastiAn. Asked by his girlfriend to be his friend on Facebook, he retorts: "I'm in front of you, I don't need to accept you on Facebook." Of course, and we do not need an algorithm to predict this, the girl breaks it off: "She thought I was cheating." I argue that it is the girl we should trust here, not SebastiAn: Why was it such a big deal for him not to be friends with his girl on Facebook? Why did he want to keep the "virtual" separate from being "in front of" her? SebastiAn here remains trapped in a humanist conception of love (ironically, for a musician who has flirted with the "hyperreal," according to the Genius website)—whereas his girlfriend *wants the alienation promised by the digital.*

Žižek's support of Trump was similarly surprising, all the more so on the surface since he seemed at one point to actually advocate voting for Trump. During an appearance on Al Jazeera after the election, he denied this, saying that he had been misquoted. Nonetheless, he was clear on how the election of Hillary Clinton would be worse for the Left than that of Trump, for the somewhat Leninist argument that Trump's election would be a disaster for the Republicans, indeed for electoral democracy, whereas Clinton would just continue the neoliberal hegemony. Be that as it may, one aspect of his analysis is worth paying attention to, and this lies in how for the Democratic consensus identity politics of a superficial kind are separated from economic and social justice. Whereas, Žižek argues, "the leftist call for justice tends to be combined with struggles for women's and gay rights, for multiculturalism and against racism … the Clinton consensus clearly dissociate[s] all these struggles from the leftist call for justice."[2] Žižek's example of this wedge issue for the Left then connects with another of his more contentious arguments—that trans rights can be

easily accommodated by global capital—offering as an example Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, who signed a letter decrying transphobic public washroom policies in North Carolina. Now, Žižek argues, Cook can "easily forget about hundreds of thousands of Foxconn workers in China assembling Apple products in slave conditions." Žižek's argument, then, is an example of how the Internet's "two bodies," as I discuss in Chapter 4, means that the condition of the workers who mine the rare metals for our devices, who assemble them, and who "like farm" and "feed scrub" necessarily must be taken account of in our postmodern, digital present.

Chapter breakdown

Chapter 1, "Does the Internet Have an Unconscious?," grounds the book's psychoanalytic take on digital culture via considerations of the unconscious in Freud, Lacan, and Jameson, speculating on whether the Internet has an unconscious or, indeed, is our unconscious. Freud's essay on "The Unconscious" provides a way of thinking about the role of email in contemporary life (but also in such Scandinavian police procedurals as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and *The Killing*). Lacan's conception of "The Position of the Unconscious," which both is and is not spatial, is an occasion to think about Internet passwords, but also how social media advertising algorithms are examples of "the unconscious as the discourse of the Other." Jameson's "political unconscious" is then mobilized as a way to think about contemporary art, and specifically painting in the digital age—looking at Los Angeles artist Laura Owens' work, in all its Photoshopped promiscuity of the brush stroke. These concepts of the unconscious suggest it as a space without contradiction, but one that nonetheless harbors a *non-dit*, an unsaid.

Chapter 2, "Slavoj Žižek as Internet Philosopher," suggests three different ways of thinking about Žižek with respect to the Internet: his methodology, his reception, and his theory. I first discuss Žižek's work in relation to digital culture in terms of his compositional process (cutting and pasting, but also auto-plagiarism), making the argument that these processes can best be understood in the digital, connected practice of the Internet. I then explore how we in turn read, or consume, or watch Žižek and his texts and performances. One does not have to read his work—one can merely listen to podcasts, watch YouTube, follow the memes—does this signify something new and post-book or post-codex about his practice? Finally, I draw on Žižek's ideas of the "obscene underside of the Law" as a way to talk about various Internet subcultures and texts: LOLcats and trolls and, in an extended analysis, Nigerian email spam as a veritable postcolonial literary genre. Here

I am making the dualistic argument that we need Žižek to understand the digital, but also that we need the Internet to understand Žižek's (and not only his) theory.

Chapter 3, "Was Facebook an Event?," brings thinking about digital culture, social media, and the Internet into dialogue with Žižek's recent work on the Event and "immaterial materialism" (in his 2014 books *Event* and *Absolute Recoil*). Žižek discusses the Event in terms of framing, but also the fantasy as frame, the fall as Event, the retroactive question of the Truth-Event (but also illusion, the Imaginary), the importance of the subject as Event, and the possibilities of fidelity to the Event, as well as infidelity, "diseventalization." If the Event is the Hegelian-Lacanian subject as "vanishing mediator," or the reframing of experience via the *Gestellen* of technology—in what way does the "immateriality" of the Internet, *les lathouses* of digital gadgets, say, allow us to think of a digital Event? What does it mean to "traverse the fantasy" of the Internet, for example? Social media, a matter of frames and their doubling, leading to considerations of how interface studies itself cogitates on the frame, but those frames determine our subjectivity, Žižek argues, suggesting perhaps, a social media big Other, "an anxious God, dreading a decision on his own status." But this question of the big Other—and his demise—also is connected to what he calls the "unmaking" of the Event, its *Ungeshhenmachen* or "diseventalization." Here recent inquiries into gender, both popular (Lena Dunham) and theoretic (the Tiqqun collective), are helpful.

In Chapter 4, "Is the Internet a Thing?," I investigate what a triangulation of Žižekian theory, object-oriented ontology (OOO), and questions of the body (of the Internet's two bodies) can bring to thinking about the digital culture. I take my cue from a number of vertices: the importance of the object or thing in psychoanalysis, the dialogue or at least missed dialogues between Žižek and OOO (especially Graham Harman, Ian Bogost, Quentin Meillassoux, and Levi Bryant), and Ernst Kantorowicz's theory of "the king's two bodies" (filtered through T.J. Clark and Eric Santner). All of this is in turn worked out via a panoply of cultural objects, including, first of all, Thomas Hirschhorn's film *Touching Reality* (which depicts a hand swiping and pinching images of atrocities on a smartphone), and the fiction of Tao Lin (*Taipei*), where, as Bogost argues, all objects are presented as a flat terrain, the MacBook and ingested pharmaceuticals no different than pineapple chunks from Whole Foods. For this is not only to talk about the "two bodies of the Internet"—meaning, first of all, the laboring bodies that make the Internet and that produce the devices, lay the cable, and clean the social media feeds—but also, following Santner's thesis in *The Royal Remains* that popular sovereignty is to be found in the "fleshly" supplement to the body, to think about what kind of

body Žižek possesses on the net. How does his "Balkan Body"—discussed in terms of contemporary art from the region (including Milija Pavićević and Šejla Kamerić)—frame his theory? The Internet's two bodies (laboring and spectacular) and the object or Thing, then, are ways to conceive of a digital materialism.

In Chapter 5, "The Subject Supposed to LOL," I ask: Is LOL a matter of interpassivity, or *jouissance*? When we type LOL, is the computer or our phone enjoying in our stead, that is, is it laughing so we do not have to (in the sense that Žižek once said the laughtrack for a sitcom laughs for us)? Or, rather, is LOL a matter of some unbearable pleasure, some digital excess? This is the project of this chapter—using LOL as a way of talking about Žižek's theories of interpassivity but also to reflect on his engagement with Fichte (the first troll?). Again, there is a range of cultural examples, from Sergio Leone's spaghetti Western epic, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, to a Hitchcock television episode, Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas,* and the contemporary artists Martha Rosler and the Russian collective Chto Delat. How much, too, are our desires to escape the digital (turning off our phones and social media fasts) already incorporated into that totality, in the dialectic of what I call the nanny state and the Red Bull state?

If we cannot escape the digital, then we might as well fall in love with it. Chapter 6, "*Her*: Or, There Is No Digital Relation (with Matthew Flisfeder)," focuses on one film, Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), as a way of inquiring more deeply into the affective relations we have with our technology, with our devices, and, in turn, with what those relationship tell us about our present-day economic hegemony. Here, Lacan's thesis that "there is no sexual relation" and Žižek's concomitant syllogism "there *is* a non-relation" are worked out and tested via a love affair between a sadsack office worker and his computer's operating system (OS). Such an exploration of the libidinal and the digital, the film suggests, is both a way of thinking about how fantasy compensates for the lack of a meaningful social sphere and, further, a model for labor that is a critique of traditional Marxist notions of class and work. This chapter also plays a role as an extended case study, as it were: on the one hand, determining if this book's theory of a digital psychoanalysis can work as an interpretive paradigm and, on the other, helping us to better understand the role of the cultural *qua* digital object.

In Chapter 7, "The Selfie and the Cloud," continuing from the *Her* argument with respect to the "non-relation," I consider the "dialectics of lack," first positing the "Selfie" as a way of thinking not only about the "mirror stage," but also about Freudian theories of narcissism and paranoia. Does the contemporary practice of the Selfie, I wonder, constitute a reflexive critique of the subject, rather than an easily dismissible site for popular ennui? How

does this cultural practice relate to earlier forms of self-portraiture, from the Renaissance and the poetry of John Ashbery to the post-conceptual photography of Tim Lee? But the Selfie is preeminently a *networked* practice, and so I then turn to the Cloud, or distributed computing, using Irish artist John Gerrard's immaculate (but also simulated) photographs of Google server farms as a way of positing the Žižekian thesis that "the big Other does not exist," but also that "there is a virtual big Other."

In the "Conclusion," I suggest that the digital, *qua* totality, lacks. And it is in this lack that the possibility of an insurrection against hegemony resides. But here, in this "fragile absolute," the very tools by which we, as it were, "jailbreak" the digital, come to matter. And so in conclusion I seek to understand better Žižek's dialectic—is it hopelessly enwrapped in a fatal antagonism? Does Jameson's dialectic offer a more hopeful (dare we say Utopian) response to the present moment? What do artistic strategies—from Hito Steyerl's "circulationism" to the mash-up—or orthodox Lacanian theory—Todd McGowan's notion of the "real gaze"—offer by way of critique? If, as Matthew Flisfeder has argued, Adorno offers us lack without the act (or without the Event), does a communist-digital politics, such as the one for which there is no big Other but there is a virtual big Other, that is to say a promise of sociality, offer any hope? Or, should we rather remain resolutely negative? Perhaps an observation *apropos* of Hitchcock's *Psycho* in Žižek's *Disparities* can help us here: watching Norman Bates clean up after murdering Marion Crane, Žižek noticed the bathroom was not properly clean: "two small stains on the side of the bathtub remained! I almost wanted to shout: Hey, it's not yet over, finish the job properly!" (*Disparities*, 161). The sociality promised by the Internet is not yet done, let's keep working!

1

Does the Internet Have an Unconscious?

This chapter is a way of beginning to think about a psychoanalysis of the digital, or of the Internet, by engaging with those concepts via the broadest and most central theorizations of "the unconscious" in Freud, Lacan, and Jameson. Each theory of the unconscious (or the position of the unconscious, or the political unconscious) helps us to think about not only what we know about the Internet (what we talk about when we talk about the Internet) but also how the role of the digital in contemporary culture (the role of email in the police procedural, or the user experience of passwords, or the question of painting in a digital epoch). I begin with the question, in Freud, of whether the Internet *has* an unconscious, or whether the Internet *is* the unconscious. I then turn to the spatialization of the unconscious and the Internet, via Lacan. In both cases, it is fair to say that the way in which the Internet contains what we forget, or do not know that we know, tells us something about the unconscious or how the unconscious functions or is sited in the contemporary moment. Then, in examining the nexus of painting and sexuality via Jameson's politics of the unconscious (and discussing the paintings of an artist who compares paint to DNA-bearing sperm!), I offer an example of reading cultural objects via the unconscious as a structure.

Freud

Freud begins his 1915 paper on "The Unconscious" with the assertion that everything that is repressed is in the unconscious, but not everything in the unconscious is there by dint of being repressed—this is on the first page of the essay; so the mechanism of repression is important, and not just because the composition and publication of this paper, in early 1915, followed closely on that of the paper on repression in the same year, nor, I would argue, because, as Freud himself declared in "The History of the Psychoanalytic Movement,"[1] repression was the cornerstone of psychoanalysis (as Strachey notes in the introduction to "Repression" [SE XIV, 143]).

Freud anticipates our digital age when he uses terms like "data" and "system": and so I would like, here, to parse Freud's text as a theory *avant la lettre* of how we relate to the Internet, a relating that perhaps has to do not only with how it functions as our writing machine but also with memory. And so he also remarks that, as an example of the unconscious, we are familiar with "ideas that come into our head we do not know from where, and with intellectual conclusions arrived at we do not know how" (SE XIV, 166–167)—as if he were looking at his inbox or Facebook page. How did that spam get in here? Is *she* my friend (one can trace the hint of negation in even asking that question)? Too, when Freud describes the topography of the unconscious, which both is and is not a physical or anatomical space (and even before the essay gets to that very interesting Freudian notion of censorship), his discussion of the localization of aphasia and other cerebral activities brings to mind not only local issues of RAM and other forms of computer memory but the more global issue of servers and cloud computing, which both is and is not located in geographic spaces.

The spatialization of the unconscious becomes important for Lacan, as we will see, but is also raised when Freud wonders if an idea (or *Vorstellung*: idea, presentation, image), when it moves from the *Ucs* to the *Cs*, is recreated anew or is merely a fresh registration: that is, if the same idea can be in two places at once (SE XIV, 174). Such musings remind us of the transmission of an email, which begins as one's typings on one's own computer or smartphone (or the server on which the email program resides), and then is copied from server to server to end up at its recipient. And the question of an anatomical location for the mind is similar to the technological fallacy that bedevils digital thought today (but see also debates on plasticity).[2]

Freud returns to the problem of "a continuous laying down of new registrations" (SE XIV, 192) later in the essay, in part VI, "Communication between the two systems" (SE XIV, 190–195), arguing that "to every transition from one system to that immediately above it … there corresponds a new censorship" (SE XIV, 192). Thus, "derivatives of the *Ucs.* become conscious as substitute formations and symptoms" (SE XIV, 193) but in the process having to circumvent two levels of censorship: the level between the *Ucs.* and the *Pcs.* and then that between the *Pcs.* and the *Cs.*

I wonder—and this is speculative—if these two levels of censorship may be viewed as qualitatively different. A contemporary example may be found in Johns Hopkins cryptography professor Brian Green's experience of censorship (documented in *The Guardian*); writing about the National Security Agency's (NSA) codebreaking activities, he was told by his department head to remove his blog from the university server (where it is mirrored) and not, remarkably, by Google, where he hosts it on blogger.com.

Following Freud's logic, the Google site is the unconscious (*Ucs.*) and the university site the preconscious (*Pcs.*).

This question of censorship—which is such a rich topic in Freud's writing, and so important as a political analogon for repression—can also be compared to the sort of filtering of email that our contemporary technological dependence requires (I am thinking of spam filters, which I discuss elsewhere).[3] This is by way of returning to Freud's mark of the unconscious as a thought that comes "into our head we do not know from where," for it is surely no accident that the question of tracing the origin of email should have become a major plot element in the so-called *police procedurals* (we only have to note the Freudian name that the Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin gave his detective: *Rebus*).

I am talking about the action of the fictional detective today.[4] This literary figure has, in a neoliberal twist, retreated from the *petit bourgeois* freelancer *à la* Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe to the procedural, which genre features a policeman or detective employed by the state: Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch, Rankin's Rebus, Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole, etc. Here we encounter the bureaucracy of the procedure—forensics, bosses to be argued with, paperwork, and territorial internecine battles.

And in three Scandinavian procedurals in particular—Norwegian Jo Nesbø's *Nemesis* (2002), Swedish Steig Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005, 2009, 2011, in both its novelistic and film versions), and the Danish television series *The Killing/Forbrydelsen* (2007–)—the question of email plays significant plot roles. Thus, in *Nemesis*, the detective Harry Hole receives emails accusing him of being present at a murder (which he was), and he pays an old friend to follow the trail of the emails to a server to Egypt, and thence back to his own cell phone, an updating, perhaps, of the 1979 horror film *When a Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton). Or in *The Killing*, a political candidate follows leaked emails back to his campaign manager. And in *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo*, not only is the heroine, Lisbeth, a hacker who plants malware (and the novel heavily features Mac products), but the IMDb.com website for the American film features a viewer question asking, "Is it that easy to hack a person's email account?" These procedural plot points may have been imbued with new relevance in the scandals over Hillary Clinton's private email servers and allegations of Russian hacking, but it can perhaps be argued that such real-life versions of thriller plots merely illustrate the psychoanalytic weight of our fascination with email: surely the role of Russia today is in part a nostalgic way to return to Cold War narratives.[5]

The 2016 US elections notwithstanding, what is evident is, then, that this phenomenon is not merely a mirroring of everyday life (if mimesis was at work, then we would have characters in romance novels or avant-garde

fictions engaged in the same pursuit).[6] The novels, films, and television series fix or answer the question but also raise that anxiety *because our anxiety with respect to email is also an anxiety about our unconscious, and its repression*. This is key to my argument in this chapter: not only that we can only understand the digital with the insights of psychoanalysis, but that we can only understand psychoanalysis today via the digital.[7]

I am not making the argument that one should ignore the practices of state and corporate surveillance—although I find Bifo's contention that privacy is a nineteenth-century bourgeois liberal fantasy compelling.[8] But, as revelation follows revelation in the 2010s of the data mining of one's personal information (which itself—that is, the ideology of a subject "owning" or "having rights to" one's information—must be questioned and historicized), one certainly feels that there is a certain structural relentlessness on the part of such apparatuses. Perhaps what we need is a psychoanalysis of those apparatuses, of their perverse needs to compile all of one's data.

Let us return to what Freud has to say specifically about the unconscious, and I am thinking here of the famous remark that the unconscious knows no contradiction. This is because the unconscious is the site of our desire, of our "wishful impulses," which "exist side by side without being influenced by one another, and are exempt from mutual contradiction" (SE XIV, 186). I would argue that this *lack of contradiction* is also what is so prevalent—and annoying—about social media and online email web browsers: when Facebook or Gmail is up on our computer screen and we see our intimate thoughts (Facebook asks me, "How are you doing, what's happening, how's it going, what's going on, how are you feeling, Clint?") surrounded by ads for belly fat or ESL or gay photography. So here the unconscious of the Internet—via that shared characteristic of lack of contradiction—is due to how the algorithms work. For Facebook, ads are triggered by your profile information (if you like cookery, you will get cookbook ads) and your likes ("You are what you like," as one online posting explains), whereas for Google ads they are triggered by your search terms.[9] In both cases, then, we have precisely what Freud discusses in terms of the contents of the unconscious: wishful impulses—with the exception or caveat that we may not, in fact, like cookbooks, even if we clicked on that button (we may have used that search term because we wanted to buy one for our cousin for his or her birthday). Thus, when I go to Amazon, I am continually being offered books that I do not want, but that I bought for my son or my brother. That is the point—our subjectivity as worked out in our unconscious is not what we *want* others to think I am (the Imaginary: cookbooks vs. cultural theory; YA novels vs. police procedurals) but the Real of our desire (which is actually to please my brother or my son). It's a matter of desire (Lacan), not taste (Bourdieu).

More recent revelations that Facebook ads were targeting anti-Semitic users confirm our thesis at this juncture: the Internet qua big Other is our unconscious, and it "knows" unconscious desires such as hatred and anti-Semitism.[10] We must add, however, further provisos: first, the Internet today "weaponizes" those desires; secondly, hatred—the alt-right—is a metastasization of online misogyny and racism, as Angela Nagle argues;[11] and, finally, the Internet carries this out through what we might call—if not algorithmic injustice (as the Propublica series of articles calls itself), then perhaps what Matthew Flisfeder terms—the "ideological althorithmic apparatus," or, as Lacan was arguing in the 1960s, the algorithmic unconscious.[12] This is to say that the problem may not be algorithms replacing humans ("machine bias," another moniker from Propublica) but the inhuman algorithms within us.

For, as Freud writes in "The Unconscious" essay, "[t]here are in this system no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty"—which certainly seems inhuman (SE XIV, 186). But if the unconscious is machinic (we will come back to the machinic in Chapter 3), what can be said about its structure? Freud adds: "[i]n the *Ucs.* there are only contents, cathected with greater or lesser strength," and this cathexis has a degree of mobility—such intensities can work through our old friends *condensation* and *displacement*—which figures Lacan will connect, via Todorov, to metonymy and metaphor, but can also be compared to the networking of links and hyperlinks. Return to Freud, the processes of the unconscious are timeless, "are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all" (187)—and they are based not on reality itself but on the nexus of pleasure-displeasure. Perhaps these last characteristics can be combined as a way of understanding the Internet: our clicks and links and likes move us around, via our pleasures or desire, through a timeless web (nothing ever goes away on the Internet, we are told) but also in a way that is a supreme time waster.

There is another, signal discussion in Freud's essay on the unconscious, with which I want to close this portion of this chapter, continuing to develop ideas about our relation to email and the Internet: this is the distinction he makes between thing-presentations and word-presentations, or *Sachevorstellung* and *Wortvorstellung*. This occurs when Freud is distinguishing between schizophrenia and more common neuroses and hysteria, remarking on the over-cathexis or investment in the words themselves to be found in the schizophrenic patient. Thus, famously, a patient of Victor Tausk referred to her boyfriend as an "eye-twister" (*Augenverdreher* or deceiver [SE XIV, 198]) and so her eyes were twisted. Freud not only remarks that schizophrenics treat words in the same way as do dreams (the primary processes of condensation and displacement), but that the unconscious is the scene of

thing-presentations, whereas word-presentations were only to be found in the conscious.

For do we not, in our relation with email, indeed treat it as a thing-presentation—not as the message that is contained in the email but as a thing, a thing that does not refer to anything else, a signifier. And so we keep "checking our email," which is not checking off a list but rather obsessive-compulsive.[13] This is to say that email, if it is a thing, may be the Thing, or *das Ding*, Lacan's *objet petit a*, which offers a nice segue to our next thinker, who I want to talk about in terms of unconscious space of the Internet.

Lacan

Immediately at the beginning of his "Position of the Unconscious," Lacan makes two important statements.[14]

First:

> The unconscious *is* a concept founded on the trail [*trace*] left by that which operates to constitute the subject. (*Écrits*, 703)[15]

and then:

> The unconscious is *not* a species defining the circle of that part of psychical reality which does not have the attribute (or the virtue) of consciousness. (*Écrits*, 703)

So, first of all, the unconscious is a concept—an idea—based on (founded on or *forgé sur)* something left over when the subject is created—that is, the *that* (a deictic shifter) "which operates to constitute the subject," be it discourse, civilization, hegemony, ideology, capital, patriarchy, whatever, has something left over, and that leftover is the unconscious.

Secondly, then, for Lacan the unconscious is not merely not-conscious; it is not part of the circle (or the entire circle, in a Venn diagram)—it's not what we're not aware of, what we don't know (or even, *contra* Žižek's appropriation of Donald Rumsfeld, the unknown known); it is not a part of knowledge, at least not in this formulation—as Lacan goes on to say, anymore than the "un-black" (*l'in-noir*) is what is not black (*Écrits*, 704).

So in this situating of the unconscious as both not not-conscious and also not part of a circle, Lacan then adds that the unconscious did not exist

before Freud. The unconscious involves the *other* in the clinical scene: psychoanalysts "constitute that to which the unconscious is addressed" (*Écrits*, 707) and perhaps not only the person of the psychoanalyst, the clinician, but also discourse—as the unconscious is "situated in the locus of the Other," and thus is found "in every discourse, in its enunciation"—so the unconscious is addressed to the analyst, is in the Other, and is in every discourse and in every enunciation.

So now we are getting somewhere in terms of our topic, if we think of how we address the computer and how we are addressed by it, and also if we think of our enunciation as we type, of the computer (that machine, a technology), and of the Internet and its locus in the cloud. The clinical situation of language, of the to-and-fro of language, Lacan calls the *recul* (*Écrits*, 708) and refines into retroactivity (*point de capiton*) and Freud's *nachträglichkeit* (*Écrits*, 711). The other returning our question in the form of a statement, an inversion that recalls the interpolated emails we often receive, where our text is suddenly added to a margin along the side with the other (the little other: our correspondent; the big Other being the Internet itself).

Lacan begins what will be one of the "money shots" of this chapter: the relation of the subject to the signifiers (the signifiers of the Internet, let us say). Those signifiers speak of the subject, constitute the subject (and speak from the position of the unconscious), where our subjectivity is constituted as much via the *subject line*, the line of text, or no text, the gap or void in the email "field"—that gap or void that then addresses us when we fail to address it with the notice "**Warning (!) No subject. Send Anyway?"**

This warning that we do not have a subjectivity, that there is no subject, speaks at a moment to the unconscious of the Internet: its failures. *The warnings and "404 file not found" and linkrot and sundry brownouts of the Internet constitute its unconscious—but also our subjectivity*.

Or, as Lacan puts it: "before he disappears as a subject beneath the signifier he becomes, due to the simple fact that it addresses him, he is absolutely nothing" (*Écrits*, 708).

That nothing that we are is thus constituted by the mistake of the Internet (or our own? in not *filling in* the subject field?)—and here the space (not filled in, a void or a lack or a gap: Lacan calls it "the cause that splits him" [708]) will be characterized in terms of a closing that retroactively denotes an opening. Speaking of the opening to Plato's cave:

> it is an entrance one can only reach just as it closes (the place will never be popular with tourists), and the only way for it to open up a bit is by calling from the inside … assuming the "open sesame" of the unconscious consists in having speech effects, since it is linguistic in

> structure … it is the closing of the unconscious which provides the key to its space—namely, the impropriety of trying to turn it into an inside. (*Écrits*, 711)

So first of all, Lacan is arguing that the unconscious is spatial, but not an inside—and yet it closes, but only before opening, and that one therefore needs a key, an "open sesame." The closing of the unconscious provides the key in the sense that, in the clinical situation, when a patient makes a Freudian slip—mentions her father but then when asked, denies it—that denial is the closing, and in uttering the denial, the analysand makes an opening into her unconscious, "provides the key"; the clinician must "call from the inside" by engaging with that mistaken term. And here we can turn again to our experience of the Internet, of the interminable keys and passwords and open sesames that we are burdened with—our memory that is in the smartphone, the ATM, the credit card, but also for innumerable websites, email passwords, or captcha.

What frequently happens is that we "forget" our passwords and so we have to be given a hint (the big Other gives it back to us), or our password is emailed to us, or we are emailed instructions to reset our password; or even more frequently, we have "cookies" in our web browser so our password is filled in automatically. In all of these cases, it is important to recognize how they constitute the spatialization of our unconscious in the Internet: our passwords are not so much in our memory (although they may be in our muscle memory); they are not IN our consciousness, but in the unconscious that is the Internet. Too, the spatialization at work here: we need the password to "enter" a website. And if the Freudian slip is the "open sesame" of the unconscious, so too it is a mistake of causality to think that we need a password to gain access to the Internet; rather, the password is the *cause* of the Internet, just as the Freudian slip is *cause* of the unconscious (the unconscious not only did not exist before Freud invented it, it did not exist before the first Freudian slip; in a less exotic way, the strategies that software developers create to retrieve passwords are necessitated by "user" errors or "fails").

And this forgetting is also key to how we think about the Internet; not only, as I argued earlier, with respect to Freud of how the Internet is supposedly permanent, *it never forgets*.[16] So whereas Lacan asserts that Freud would remember the joke from a drunken party the night before, now we are trying to forget, but in order to forget we must remember our password. Lacan continues, arguing that the unconscious is between the subject and the Other (which is to say that the unconscious is the password mangled between the user and the Internet/computer: "The unconscious is, between the two of them, their cut in action" (*Écrits*, 712). Or their cut *of* the action: those

pop-up websites for Russian casinos (or Russian girls) that appear when you try to download something. Then, speaking of casinos and girls, the money shot: "The register of the signifier is insinuated on the basis of the fact that a signifier represents a subject to another signifier" (*Écrits*, 713).

A signifier represents a subject to another signifier: this is totally the psychoanalytic semiotics of email (the instance of the letter indeed), which are not transmitted from one subject to another but from a subject (or representing a subject) to another signifier (not from a subject but rather the subject is himself or herself from another signifier).

Thus, to recap: Lacan's unconscious is a matter of a remainder, that which is not not-conscious, spatialized, and a matter of the signifier. Our practices as Internet users are manifestly what Lacan or how Lacan characterizes our interactions with not only the unconscious, but the Other: via language, via the signifier (which are not the same thing), and via the "open sesame" and the retroactivity of meaning. Secondly, the practice of the Internet also demonstrates the spatiality of the unconscious—a spatiality that is *not* three-dimensional, and yet is social. The Internet is our outsourced memory or unconscious—we go "on the web" or "check out" a website, we have "inboxes," and so on.

But there has been another throughline to these thoughts, only made apparent to me during the editing of the chapter: this has to do with the relationship between the Thing and the big Other, with email as the Thing that arouses our anxiety and the Internet as the big Other. On the one hand, we are always "retrieving" or checking our email—it is a tic, a nervous or obsessional activity that no doubt causes automobile crashes, pedestrian collisions, and neglected stovetops (or children or spouses!) every day. But what is this Thing that is so close to us (nestled in a pocket near our genitals, or carried in our hand like a Willie Wonka ticket) and yet so far away? What is that Internet, that Thing, that email that we are waiting for, and why is so much psychic energy deposited there? I want to come back to these questions at the conclusion of this chapter, but first turn to the question of the politics of this unconscious, and our third theorist under discussion, the American Marxist, Fredric Jameson.

Jameson

In turning to the work of Jameson, I evidently want to engage with a more directly political register to these questions of the unconscious; here I will restrict myself in terms of his work to the introductory chapter, "On

Interpretation," from his 1981 book *The Political Unconscious.*[17] You will remember that Jameson begins by distinguishing between three different kinds of historical causality: mechanical, expressive, and structural. His point first of all is not to avant-gardely dismiss the first two; he argues that political readings which make topical or allegorical references are not just misreadings, rather, the resistance to those readings is itself political. Jameson's position is in many ways Althusserian, and therefore Lacanian: history is the Real, which is to say not a text, but only available to us as a narrative or text (*PU*, 35). And then within any cultural work there will be a well-nigh Freudian machinery of condensation and displacement, not merely of the libidinal or sexual (more on which shortly) but also the political, which must then be mediated, from the social into the cultural.

The particular and genuinely new form of Freudian dreamwork that Jameson then identifies is ideology as a "strategy of containment" (*PU*, 52–53)—the use of pop culture or the ideological closure and repression (a form of fetishistic disavowal). Thus, Marxist criticism methodologically requires a concept of the unconscious ("or at least some mechanism of mystification or repression" [*PU*, 60]) in order to work out how a text does not simply mean what it says.

With Freud, then, Jameson argues that "the autonomization of family as a private space within the nascent public sphere of bourgeois society" not only included the "autonomization of sexuality" but that the "precondition for the articulation and analysis of the mechanisms of desire … lies in the preliminary isolation of sexual experience, which enables its constitutive features to carry wider symbolic meaning" (64).

Jameson also urges the historicization of sight: what were originally contingent features of religious relics and rituals became—whether through the development of easel painting or the colonists' pillaging of totems and masks—the genres of landscape and portrait and still life and, more recently, the further specialization of light and the brush stroke (Impressionism and pointillism) until the Greenbergian picture plane (modernism) and its dialectical other, the anti-retinalcentric triumph of conceptualism. For Jameson, then, questions of the unconscious, and the libidinal, are inextricably connected to the visual, and so it makes sense to turn to art.[18]

Keeping all of this in mind—Jameson's notion of the reification or commodification of sexuality and desire being necessary to their psychoanalytic interpretation—what, we might ask, is the political unconscious of painting today? I was drawn to this particular form by the work of Laura Owens, a Los Angeles artist who teaches at UCLA and was the youngest artist (age thirty-four) ever to have a retrospective at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 2004.[19] Her paintings have drawn

on a wide range of source material, from old masters, the baroque, fabric, and outsider art. Her recent exhibitions, at Sadie Cole HQ in London and Gavin Brown's project space in Los Angeles (2013), consist of twelve large, 10'x10' canvases which in their composition and images reference commercial and graphic art and design (but especially 1980s design and even Patrick Nagel's album covers for Duran Duran; Owens' nickname for one of her works was "The Eighties Called, They Want their Painting Back") as well as graffiti, newspaper ads and imagery, and especially web design (and our haptic gestures) via questions of thickness, drop shadows, and layering.

Laura Owens' art stages the triumph of painting over the digital: her paintings are "post-Internet art."[20] Their very size transcends the miniscule tablets, laptops, and smartphones; too, their tactility, the plump puffs of paint (as if extruded from a giant tube of toothpaste) imply a haptic dialectic whereby the gesture of our swiping and pinching of touchscreens here is not only magnified, but gargantuan, made more sensuous. Our consumer electronics cannot be so big, so tempting to touch.

If this is so, if this reading is true, what is the political unconscious at work here, what is it that cannot be said—or visually represented—in such work? In Owens' paintings evidently size itself matters: but that "size" is also social. Her enormous canvases were shown as the inaugural exhibition at a "project" space complete with front-of-house retail venue (catered by a hip taqueria for the opening) located in a desolate, off-the-grid section of Los Angeles (Skid Row or Boyle Heights, a historically Japanese-Latino neighborhood now gentrifying). Thus, you can buy not only a Laura Owens artist book but "locovore" collections of jams and nut spreads with her brand.[21]

The institutional reification of Laura Owens' work turns out to have a class dimension in its triumph over the digital; unlike such a common, populist medium (the Internet), painting here safely asserts its elite space, the gallery a gated community keeping out the online masses. And yet there is also a utopian reading of the paintings' unconscious. This is especially so if we consider the art's relation to the Internet first in terms of Laura Owens' shocking formal promiscuity—the mix-mastered content of styles, periods, mediums, and tonalities is perhaps a nod to the "fugly" aesthetics of user-generated content and 4chan/meme factories. But also via a critique of the gesture itself, gesture qua commodified swipe and pinch that reduces the haptic to a nervous tic, which can be accomplished only via its historicization (but also first its contextualization with respect to the hands of the factory workers at Foxconn and elsewhere, and their gestures, their hands; and then a response with the gestures of Occupy). We can think of an art history of the hand and the gesture—the classical workshop of the old masters (where the gesture qua brushstroke was hidden, glossed over, but with a division

of labor), the modernist era of 1850–1945 (from the Impressionists and pointillists and fauvists' brushstrokes to the abstract-expressionist "libidinal brushstroke" as mark of the painter *qua* individual and his gendered style), and the Pop of the 1960s (the return of the machine-made or factory-made work, now making visible the mistake—Warhol's off-register prints—or outsourcing of conceptualism).

And so, just as Jameson argues that sight, or sexuality, or desire are reified, so too is the gesture, and it is a history of that reification that Laura Owens' paintings call for. As a preliminary note toward that history, I want to close this discussion of Jameson's political unconscious by turning toward his three levels of interpretation. The first deals with the cultural object as text, via the everyday of political Events and contexts, which are then managed by the text as a symbolic act that results in an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction; then, at the second level, the text is an utterance in a dialogical struggle, the text qua ideologeme; finally, at the third level, the text is superseded to the level of genre (or, here, medium), as the ideology of said form in relation to modes of production. The political unconscious of Laura Owens' paintings therefore stages at the first level an imaginary resolution of the contradiction in class politics where the digital divide is rewritten as its older ancestor, cultural capital (to return to Bourdieu); then at the second level, in the dialogic utterance of the gesture itself as a movement of the hand or the finger (or paintbrush or mouse), we have a staging of the ideologeme of the obsolescence of painting; then, at the third level, we have genre and medium in relation to modes of production which contradiction here is signaled by the title of Owens' works in London: "Pavement Karaoke," a ventriloquism of the street, of pastiche or simulacra, the contradiction between the (touch) screen and the (don't touch!) canvas as what in another context one might call postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Conclusions

I want to offer some provisional conclusions, first with specific references to the discussions of Freud and Lacan, and then a more global finish. With respect to the Freudian unconscious and its similarity to how we think of email, the mistake would be to conclusively or empirically "fix" the source of the email in such places as the server, the server farm, or the cloud. This mistake is illustrated in the Nesbø novel, where a harassing email is chased first to Saudi Arabia, then to the detective's own (misplaced) cell phone, and then, finally, to a laptop in his basement storage locker. The narrative

illustrates where our emails come from: our own unconscious. And then to think of Lacan's position of the unconscious and its keywords and passcodes, surely our plethora of codes is a vernacular or popular instance of "analysis interminable." We keep asking the computer, the email provider, the website, *Che vuoi?* What do you want? I know you want my password but what do you really want? And so our critical analysis must situate this text that is the Internet in a political unconscious, one that resists both the glorification of the digital as that which will save activism (or the humanities) *and* the dismissal of same as retrograde, or commodified, or complicit in a banal way. This is, I think, a way to bring together these cultural examples and theories and the role of our bodies in a disembodied political praxis. To return to the chapter's title, and to the remarks on anxiety and the big Other that closed the previous question: in some ways, I have been arguing that the Internet *is* our unconscious because of how we relate to it in a transferential way (in the specific sense that Lacan argues, having to do with desire being the desire of the Other, for instance). So whether it is Facebook ads that know what we want before we do, or passwords that we forget, or emails that ensure white-collar workers are working 24x7 or art that can now confidently draw on our historical knowledge of digital memes, the Internet knows us, and knows what we know, and even knows what we don't know we know (which is to say, again, our unconscious). But there is also the question of whether the Internet *has* an unconscious: Is that its political economy? A few years ago John Lanchester wrote, in the *London Review of Books*, about Moroccan workers being paid a dollar an hour to scan Facebook for offensive images. Or is the unconscious the "dark web," and other obscene corners of trolls and pornographers? Or, finally, is the Internet's unconscious its process of distorting social and personal desires into monetized and clickable data? These are questions opened up for me by this chapter, and which it is part of a larger project to try and investigate and, perhaps, answer.

2

Slavoj Žižek as Internet Philosopher

In the previous chapter I argued that the way in which we relate to the Internet, or to the digital, suggests some classic psychoanalytic concepts of the unconscious. Now I want to suggest three different ways of thinking about Žižek with respect to the Internet: first, his methodology; second, his reception; and third, his theory. First, the ways in which Žižek constructs his texts and makes his argument can best be understood in the digital, connected practice of the Internet. Second, how we read (or do not read), or consume, or watch Žižek and his texts and performances signifies something new, something post-book or post-codex about his practice. Third, Žižek's concept of the "obscene underside of the Law" is a way to talk about various Internet subcultures and texts: LOLcats and trolls but especially Nigerian spam.

Žižek's self-plagiarizing as technique *par excellence* of writing in the age of the Internet

A commonplace of Žižek's critics is that he merely "cuts and pastes" sections from one book into another (see, for a survey, Bowman and Stamp's *The Truth of Žižek).* For example, Žižek's "Melancholy and the Act" section of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* began as an essay in *Critical Inquiry* the previous year (2000). But here the problem is that Žižek *did not repeat himself enough*—in the *Critical Inquiry* version, he begins his discussion of the big Other with examples from a Hollywood book by Roger Ebert, a set of examples that is dropped from the essay when it is printed in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Then, as a kind of *objet petit a* or indivisible remainder, the Roger Ebert passage appears in two other books published at roughly the same time as the *Critical Inquiry* article and the *Totalitarianism* book: first, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, a dialogue between Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, and Judith Butler, and then in Žižek's essay "The Real of Sexual Difference," which first appeared in a book on Lacan's twentieth seminar, and then was collected in *Interrogating the Real.* This question of Žižek's

plagiarism, or repetition compulsion, is better understood as what he calls an "obscene narrative kernel that has to be 'repressed' in order to remain inoperative" (*CHU*, 133n41).

Now, there is a scene in the *Žižek!* documentary by Astra Taylor where we see Žižek working on his computer, writing an essay, and declaring that his method is to begin with notes, or ideas and then at a certain point assemble them into a text, an essay or book; in such a manner he avoids actually writing, skipping directly from note-taking to editing ("I put down notes, and edit it, writing disappears"). And this patchwork or collage method certainly does seem to characterize much of his writing. Thus, if a Lacanian scholar seeking Žižek's take on (what we used to call) "cyberspace" turns to Chapter 4 of *The Plague of Fantasies* ("Cyberspace, Or, The Unbearable Closure of Being"), she first must wade through discussions of Hegel's concept of the "rabble" (*Pöbel*) in modern civil society, the films of Buñuel, and Charlie Chaplin on the voice in cinema; even once Žižek starts discussing virtual reality and Multi-User Domains (MUDs), he then turns to his real love, *film noir*, with Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe*.

Indeed, such a panoply of references while utterly typical of post-1980s cultural studies (the *Ur*-text surely being Jameson's postmodernism essay, which moved from punk rock to Language poetry, from Andy Warhol to E.L. Doctorow, from the death of the subject to *Star Wars*),[1] that same surfeit of surface is, Žižek argues, a hallmark of the Internet age, where "we witness a return to *pensée sauvage*," as "an 'essay' in cyberspace confronts fragments of music and other sounds, text, images, [and] video clips," ending with the question, "Is not hypertext a new practice of montage?" (*PF*, 167).

Readers of Žižek will recognize this passage first of all as one of his false arguments, a "myth about cyberspace" he will quickly dismiss. Thus, on the next page he argues that there nonetheless is something behind this screen, this interface, a "indivisible remainder." But I want to take these two structuring principles: the repetition of his own work (auto-plagiarism) and the hypertext-like structure of Žižek's writings themselves as an indication of a shift from the production regime of the typewriter to that of the Internet.

And here my point of reference will be contemporary literary production, or what is known as conceptual writing or flarf. This practice, which ranges from sculpting poems out of Google searches to retyping an entire issue of *The New York Times*, makes the claim that with the Web, writing has met its photography. Much as photography forced painting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into an increasingly radical series of anti-pictorial strategies, from Pointillism and Cubism to Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, so too, the conceptualist writer Kenneth Goldsmith claims,

"never before has language had so much materiality—fluidity, plasticity, malleability—begging to be actively managed by the writer." Now, Goldsmith goes on to declare, "text typed into a Microsoft Word document can be parsed into a database, visually morphed into Photoshop, animated in Flash, pumped into online text-mangling engines, [or] spammed to thousands of e-mail addresses."[2] In a like manner, David J. Gunkel makes the argument that Žižek's philosophical practice and texts can be understood in terms of the early twenty-first-century concept of the mash-up (hence, *The Grey Album, Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, Django Unchained*)—as a Žižekian "short circuit" or "parallax" that connects two disparate traditions (be they music—the Beatles and Jay-Z—literary—nineteenth-century realism and pulp fiction—or historical—blaxploitation and the spaghetti Western): thus, in Žižek we find not only Hegel and Lacan but also Hitchcock, *Kung Fu Panda*, and Henry James.

Gunkel distinguishes this practice from the remix (a new version of an old track), which can then be likened to Deleuze's metaphor of buggering philosophers so they give rise to monstrous children. And the mash-up is sublimely a practice of the Internet age, depending on both the digital distribution *and* the digital construction of (musical, especially) works to outwit intellectual property rights. Gunkel supports his argument that such mash-ups constitute a Žižekian "short circuit" by citing Žižek's description of the same, but taken from the "Short Circuit" book series that Žižek edits at MIT Press, a textual strategy that might itself constitute a kind of short circuit all on its own: "A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network—faulty, of course, from the stand point of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading?"[3]

The concept of the "short circuit" occurs widely in Žižek's *oeuvre*: thus, the misrecognition inherent in Althusserian interpellation is a kind of short circuit, or his thesis that desire in a dream is to be found not in repressed wishes but in the way those wishes are transformed, through the "short circuit" of the dreamwork, into manifest content, or the Pascalian wager as short circuit (*SO*, 42); or, the dialectic between prohibition and demand in totalitarianism and the superego as a short circuit (*ME*, 65–66); or the notion that "emancipatory politics is generated by the short-circuit between the universality of the public use of reason and the universality of the 'part of no part'."[4] This list is not exhaustive—the phrase shows up a dozen times in *Metastases* alone, as well as in the criticism (Gunkel, Dean, Kotsko)—and the variety of uses of the term is symptomatic of how such semantemes develop over the course of Žižek's body of work (*gentrification* and *sublime* are similar Žižekian keywords), but what is also interesting here is what I take to be a

point of origin for the phrase, in Lacan's discussion of his graphs of desire. Elucidating graph 2, he writes the following:

> This Imaginary process, which goes from the specular image to the constitution of the ego along the path of subjectification by the signifier, is signified in my graph by the $\overrightarrow{ia.m}$ vector, which is one-way but doubly articulated, first as a short circuit of the $\overrightarrow{\$.I(A)}$ vector, and second as a return route of the $\overrightarrow{A.s(A)}$ (*Écrits*, 685)

What this "originary" short circuit in Lacan means, then, is the subject's Imaginary misrecognition: seeing itself in a the mirror *sans* the other, without making the circuit through the A (Autre), or big Other; in *The Sublime Object*, Žižek distinguishes between this Imaginary identification versus Symbolic identification proper: "to achieve self-identity, the subject must identify himself with the Imaginary other, he must alienate himself" (104). In like fashion, we should here mark a difference between the *form* of the short circuit in Lacan and its *substance*; if the latter has to do with the question of Imaginary identification, the former is a matter of circumventing the symbolic order but at the cost of remaining trapped in a fantasy of that circumvention. And here we should return to the question of the short circuit of the Internet itself, or of using Žižek's concept of the short circuit as a way both of characterizing how we function on the net and to criticize the same.

Reception versus distribution: Philosophy after the book

For surely Žižek's texts stand in as a test case for the post-codex philosophical work (Kittler, Flusser, David Scott Kastan on digital distribution): while they (often) still exist as books, they also have an important stature in various digital realms, from those that are simply the "digitization" of the codex that Žižek speaks of in *The Plague of Fantasies* from pirated searchable PDFs (as was available online immediately after the publication of his Hegel magnum opus *Less than Nothing* in the summer of 2012), to the Google book versions, the PDFs of individual articles and chapters; various online articles ranging in origin from the canonical lacan.com website to less scholarly appearances in *The Guardian* and *In These Times*; but also podcasts (from Birkbeck College and the European Graduate School), YouTube lectures, and writings about his work that again range in critical and journalistic quality, to Žižek memes, Žižek blogs, Žižek on Twitter, and the inevitable Žižek RSA whiteboard lecture.

So what? Many books are digitized, are on Google books, you can watch Judith Butler or Alain Badiou on YouTube, there are Twitter accounts for Foucault, Freud, Adorno, blah blah blah. And yet what is arguably exemplary (or a *universal exception*) about Žižek's production, his celebrity, his brand, his *Barthesian mythology*, if you will, is how its signification has from the start embraced such a high-low range, not merely in terms of content, but also tone, or affect, or style. That is, a common criticism of his celebrity is that the archetypal "reader" of Žižek is hardly a reader at all, but merely a New York gallery assistant or Berlin hipster who has watched a couple of videos and knows the catch-phrases: "Žižek, … apparently stands as the Father of Modern Hipster Thought. 'I used to work at American Apparel, and he was the only intellectual anyone had heard of.'"[5] For all this, surely the performative value of Žižek's lectures, visual signification, quasi-Tourettes tics, and so on ("not enough nose touching in this one," one YouTube commentator mentions apropos of Žižek's "Don't Just Act, Think" video) possesses as much meaning as more thoughtful disquisitions on the possibilities of socialism (as other commentators offer in the same YouTube stream); or, rather, such high and low strata coexist in a way that is typical both of Žižek's own textual production *and* of the blogosophere.[6]

But where am I going with respect to the short circuit? First of all, the e-proliferation of Žižek's work in such various digital realms constitutes a way in which his texts—or their reception—can be short-circuited: you don't have to pay $50 for a massive hardcover, you can download it; you don't have to even *read* the thing, you can watch a video. But this form of digital textuality also infiltrates or characterizes our own practices as researchers (or as academic readers). Think of how the Internet and Google books function as a virtual index. Thus, even as I own dozens of copies of Žižek's books, multiple copies as well as various semi-legal PDFs, when trying to find a passage I am as likely to do a Google search and/or especially look through digitized copies of his books.

And this perhaps provides us with the flipside to Žižek's method: the reception of his work is first of all similar to the conceptual writing practice of Vanessa Place and her crew: Kenneth Goldsmith has argued that he writes books that you do not necessarily have to read. We can also think of our own methodologies, such as the "distant reading" that Franco Moretti has promulgated in his manifestos for world literature, from *Graphs, Maps, and Trees* (2005) to the more recent books *The Bourgeois* and *Distant Reading*. But, more specifically, see the Digital Humanities (DH) practices of Ed Finn's *Literary Lab Pamphlet* "Becoming Yourself: The Afterlife of Reception" (September 15, 2011), which compared Amazon reviews of David Foster Wallace's novels to professional criticism, not by reading 1,000 reviews but

via "a combination of Perl scripts (to gather and groom the data), a MySQL database (to store it), and the visualization tool yEd" (3). The topic of reading is surely important, both for the practice of theory (or philosophy) and for its reception; we will shortly see how much of what we do read is in fact first read for us by other, non- or post-human readers.

But the "grey area" of pirated or bootleg digital books and PDFs is also worth considering with respect to Žižek's production and reception, and not only because of how these texts—or objects—simultaneously problematize and make possible a standard critique of these DH projects. As Mark Sample argues convincingly in his essay "Unseen and Unremarked on: Don DeLillo and the Failure of Digital Humanities," copyright law renders much of twentieth-century printed texts inaccessible to contemporary DH practices of data mining, searching, etc.[7] So while pirate PDFs are accessible to unscrupulous readers—and to some rudimentary keyword searches—they are resistant to proper DH practices that depend on standardized tagging, digitization, metadata, and so on. And John B. Thompson, in his Bourdieu-ish survey of UK and US trade publishing, *The Merchants of Culture*, argues that digitization of books, and the status of pirate threats to publishers and booksellers, resembles that of the music industry and its threat from Napster and MP3 piracy, although without, as of yet, the same repercussions.[8]

It is also worth considering whether these alternative forms of reading Žižek—from distant reading to podcast listening, from meme following to PDF downloading, from not reading to misreading—are themselves necessarily new in the history of reading. Without getting into, here, a social history of reading *qua* practice, I want to consider a form of reading that contributes to the psychoanalysis of that practice. In the Nicholson Baker book *U and I: a True Story* a young novelist writes about John Updike from the perspective *not* of re-reading, or having read all, of Updike's *oeuvre.* In what Baker calls "*not a disarming admission … an enraging admission!*" (32), he lists Updike books he has read only a few pages of, or "fewer than twenty pages of," or less than or more than half of, or most or all of. Baker's point is to write about how a younger writer engages with the older writer as a combination mentor/father/annoyance (and, yes, he references Harold Bloom). But he also makes two important arguments here. One is the role of misquotation, or quoting from memory—he offers up remembered quotations from Updike, etc., and then after writing the book goes back and inserts the correct one. This is evidently in homage to Updike's own mentor, Nabokov, who, in the Russian style, would quote from memory (and often get it wrong). The other argument is the role that books play in terms of their

own misreadings or nonreadings. Here is the quote (to Baker, incidentally, is talking about Harold Bloom):

> I know about "misprision" only from book reviews—book reviews, not books, being the principal engines of change in the history of thought, and contributing in that necessary role a certain class of distortions to the forward flow by allowing those works which contain plots and arguments that are easily summarized in their reviews to assume a level of cultural bulk and threat that the books themselves may or may not deserve.

So ideas spread, Baker argues, not so much from (or not only from) actual books in which they are worked out, but also via their readings in reviews, through their encapsulations in the hands and words of other writers and intellectuals. I do not know or care if this is empirically true, but what is interesting here is the Freudian idea of distortion: the book review as a kind of "dreamwork" that condenses and displaces the arguments of a book into a discourse of a reading public.

But the anxieties of reading and not reading are both social and deeply felt. In Althusser's autobiography (if my memory is correct), he mentions a French communist party official who, when visiting, would look at one's copies of Marx, of *Capital,* to see that the pages were marked, worn. And Althusser himself was rife with (in a Lacanian sense perhaps psychotic) worries over not having read Marx closely enough (something George Steiner lacerated him for in reviewing the memoir). Derrida also had anxieties about not being able to sink into a book when reading it, always reaching for a pen to start his own writing.

With these ideas in mind, how can we characterize Žižekian reading culture? Do his ideas spread as much via their distortions (in reviews, but also his lectures and podcasts, YouTube videos, and even memes) as the "actual" reading of his books? But "actual reading" is itself a straw man: on the one hand, we should not privilege that practice, mistake it for some empirical encounter with the text—whether, as with Nabokov, we agree that all reading is rereading (would we take our first reading of Hegel as more profound if, after slogging through his books any number of times, we come across a perfect quote in *Hegel for Beginners*?), or, to remain in the Žižekian orbit, we recognize that the annoying way we reencounter an anecdote or example or quotation or film crit in his works really bothers us because now we have to *re-read*.

Žižek does address the practice of reading more directly, referring to Pierre Bayard's contrarian-chic *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*, and he

allows, in *Less than Nothing*, that it is better not to read all of an author's works or individual books: "too much data only blurs our clear vision," and, furthermore, the best way to grasp "Hegel's thought in its living movement" is more likely when reading a one-sided critic, not Hegel's work itself (*LtN*, 279–280). I do not know how far we want to go with this proposition, but what it does illustrate perfectly is how we use Google books today: as a partial reading of a text. This is to say that Žižek's proposition must not be dismissed as ironic (as he remarks Bayard must not be). Blanks exist in texts for any number of reasons, from corporate or state censorship (redaction, Google pages missing) to deterioration of the text (such as one encounters in a thrift store or archive), from memory's gaps to misreadings that can approach a psychotic level of clarity.

The Internet is the obscene underside

So, here in the final section of this chapter I want to turn to Žižek's theory of the obscene underside of the law as a way of understanding some of the tendencies, subcultures, practices, and textualities of the Internet. Žižek's theory is worked out in *Metastases of Enjoyment*, and "Re-visioning 'Lacanian' Social Criticism: the Law and Its Obscene Double." His argument is, first of all, that it is a mistake to assume the law functions as a monolithic entity: rather, it addresses us as split subjects, and there is a concomitant "gap between public discourse and its fantasmic support" ("Re-visioning," *IR*, 263). This gap is due to a failure in the law—thus superego steps in, with the paradoxical demand that the law depends on its *illegal* enjoyment (*ME*, 54)—the law is incomplete and must be "supplemented by a clandestine 'unwritten' code" (55). Here two points are crucial: on the one hand, we should not underestimate how that fantasmic support—the "castrated Master," as Žižek puts it—is a function of enjoyment for the masses (thus Trump's vulgarisms or former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper's zombielike lack of affect are enjoyed by their supporters—Žižek calls this the "leader with his pants down" syndrome—*ME*, 58). Secondly, the notion that social norms (the big Other) depend upon their transgression is illustrated in an example Žižek returns to again and again from the Rob Reiner film *A Few Good Men* (1992), where U.S. Marines kill one of their own under an unofficially sanctioned "code red."

To complete Žižek's argument as to the etiology or genealogy of the obscene underside of the law, he argues, referencing Bakhtin on carnival, that in traditional patriarchal societies the reversal of societal norms (the

king is unseated by the fool, army officers serve their men on Boxing Day [a tradition in British and Canadian military], Greek women enjoy a day in the café while the men take care of the children) served the purpose of reinforcing those norms; then, with the coming of the Enlightenment and bourgeois-democratic society, carnivalesque transgressions take on the very totalitarianism that has been forced underground—thus, the KKK, or Abu Ghraib. This repression also effects a split: while we have the symbolic law concerned with meaning, we have the superego of enjoyment, or the key support that ideology finds in enjoyment—from identification with the Nation-Thing to transgression as such which tend to solidify the law.

If this is so, and transgression and the obscene underside of the law as such are a key form of support of the law, then how can we critique, or subvert, or work collectively to change such oppression? One answer offered by Žižek is through overidentification. Since the law is split (into its official form and its unofficial subversion), cynical distance or irony is not only ineffective but also part of its very functioning (his example is from the movie/TV show *M*A*S*H*, in which the very cynical surgeons are also highly expert doctors; or think of the role that fetishistic disavowal plays in contemporary society as a form of support for neoliberal hegemony, all the while fetishizing lifestyle). So Žižek argues that overidentification with the law can be a form of undercutting its efficacy (from *The Good Soldier Schweik* to the Slovenian punk band Laibach).

OK, so let's turn to some Internet culture to explore this theory. From spam mail, malicious memes, LOLcats, and trolls, the Internet seems to offer any variety of trivial, malignant, offensive, but also transgressive examples of an obscene underside to the official forums of Facebook, email, Google, and Amazon and other corporate presences, and government or academic websites. So this is a more global or schematic claim of this book: that Žižek's concept of that obscene underside provides a way of understanding the stain of enjoyment that is the counterpart to the more logocentric meaning and official façade of the web. For example, LOLcats, as text- and image-based memes that spawn not only the circulation of such user-generated content but also the vernacular of "lolcat," or texting abbreviations, emoticons, and l33tspeak (numbers embedded in words: see Miltner) function specifically via the transgressive/*jouissance* of LOL, a form of Žižekian interpassivity (the acronym LOL, laughs out loud—or ROFL, rolling on the floor laughing, or LMFAO, laughing my fucking ass off—so we don't have to)—a specific example I deal with more comprehensively in a later chapter.

Or, we can consider the moral panic that has been spread in recent years about the so-called trolls, or hackers, or cyber-bullies who post anonymous, often vitriolic, comments and images in message boards or Facebook pages

(I think that Žižek would argue that the cyber-bully, like the stalker—or smoker—is a Lacanian neighbor, one whose enjoyment we hate because we hate our own). Here we have to distinguish between the overlapping activities or practices and subjectivities or identities of hacking, hacktivism, Anonymous (with a capital A), stalking, harassment, and trolls; the first often designates those who use online resources to break into databases or servers; the second that practice with a specifically political purpose (including the WikiLeaks activities); the third a loose coalition of self-identified hacktivists, often based out of the 4chan message board since the mid-2000s and some of whom have taken as their icon the Guy Fawkes mask from *V is for Vendetta*[9]; the online practices of stalking or harassment which continue the physical activities (including obscene phone calls) of the pre-Internet age; and "trolls" as a generic term both for those who post obscene comments as a way to generate pointless debate—often making statements they do not agree with merely for that purpose—and for those who self-identify as trolls, including the posting of violent or racist/misogynistic images and statement on Facebook memorial pages.[10]

But my argument is slightly different with spam. Now, we are all familiar with spam, and especially with the varieties of the so-called Nigerian spam, or emails that come from Nigeria (or from former soldiers in Iraq or from London barristers), calling us "dear" in charmingly awkward syntax offering to send us $10 million if we hold a much larger sum in our bank account. These scams, or "advance fee fraud," are oftimes referred to as "419" fraud, after the relevant section of the Nigerian Criminal Code. While the practice goes back at least to the Spanish Prisoner con in the Elizabethan era, a writer in *Slate* notes that the modern scam has its precise origin with mail fraud in Nigeria in the 1970s, first using photocopied letters, then in the 1980s fax machines, and, beginning in the 1990s but spiking ten years ago, with Internet email. Indeed, the prevalence of cyber cafes in Lagos and other African cities (Umuahia, in Eastern Nigeria, is also a hotbed [Nwaubani, "In Conversation"]) enables the scam and, arguably, the importance of the 419 business to helping to build the digital infrastructure in Nigeria, much as the downloading of porn drove the US infrastructure in the 1990s.[11] And while statistics from the early 2000s (when Nigerian spam was in its heyday) show that most Internet fraud originates in the United States, actual amounts of money lost due to Nigerian email seem to vary wildly. Thus, companies that have an interest in anti-spamming technology, such as Netherlands-based fraud investigation company "Ultrascan," estimate losses at $3 billion globally in 2005, the US Secret Service estimates $100 million lost in 2002, and other estimates range from $1,650 to $5,957, per complainant.[12]

Following are three characteristics of 419 spam call for a Žižekian interpretation: first, the role of language in their rhetorical or generic instability; second, the patent obviousness of the letters themselves and the question of gullibility; and, third, the phenomenon of spam baiting or cyber vigilantism. The ornate linguistic indeterminacy of 419 spam is surely one of the most remarkable aspects of these digital texts: the all-caps form of some, their melding of real and fictitious narratives (thus, an October 2012 email referred to the death of Kenyan politician Kipkalya Kones—who actually died in a plane crash in 2008),[13] the address of the recipient, a total stranger, as DEAR, and other apostrophes that, as one critic noted, seem straight out of an eighteenth-century protocol book:

> "It is with a heart full of hope … " reads one. "Compliments of the season. Grace and peace and love from this part of the Atlantic to you" is how another starts. "Goodday to you, I would here crave your distinguished indulgence" begins a third. And still another opens, "It is with my profound dignity that I write you."[14]

Now this last critic, Douglas Cruikshank (*Salon* in 2001), was calling for a literary appreciation of the 419 spam. He begins his article writing that "Born in Africa over a decade ago, a renaissance in short fiction writing is spreading across the globe via the Internet, breathing new life into the always troubled romance between art and crime." The novelist Chris Cleave has more recently written that "these missives are an unsung literary form, a river of wheedling, flattery and grasping that flows directly from the desires of the human heart." Other critics, including the Nigerian-Canadian poet-scholar Pius Adesanmi, have argued that "the 419 letter now stakes a vigorous claim to an ontological identity as art." Academic commentators have also noted the hybrid genre of 419 and other spam: the text designed to harvest email or bank information that poses as an ad that is itself nestled within an overly familiar epistle or bureaucratic memorandum. Indeed, according to a rhetorical analysis that drew upon a "native informant," as it were, a writer of the 419 scams, the tone of the letters relies on a very interesting postcolonial hybridity: on the one hand, the tone mimics that of Nigerian soap operas, as many targets are themselves African (contradicted by other studies which claim targets are from North America and Europe); on the other hand, "I was told to write like a classic novelist would," Taiwo ["Twin"] explained. "Very old world, very thick sentences, you know?"[15]

Finally, in a dynamic, if not dialogic, relationship, the language and actual lexicon of this and most spam presumes two sets of readers: the human reader and the various spam filtering programs, which rely on a form of Baysean

probability logic, judging whether to block an email depending on what "tokens"—words, URLs, colors, etc.—it has that resemble either legitimate email (the so-called "ham") or spam.

How does Žižek help here? A well-known precept of Lacanian theory is that "the letter always arrives at its destination." Formulated in his seminar on Poe's "Purloined Letter" (indeed it is the concluding line of the essay: *Écrits*, 30), Lacan's precept plays on what the Lacanian "wikipedia" (*No Subject*) calls "the double-meaning of the term 'letter,'" presenting "Poe's account of a written document (a letter) which passes through various hands as a metaphor for the signifier which circulates between various subjects, assigning a peculiar position to whoever is possessed by it." Indeed, Žižek argues that the letter's "true addressee is namely not the empirical other which may receive it or not, but the big Other, the symbolic order itself which receives it the moment the letter is put into circulation" (*EYS!* 10). Is the symbolic order here the Internet? And think, too, of our common greeting to colleagues in the hallway: *Did you get my email?* Žižek goes on to say that "[w]hen the letter arrives at its destination, the stain spoiling the picture is not abolished, effaced: what we are forced to grasp is, on the contrary, the fact that the real "message," the real letter awaiting us is the stain itself" (*EYS!* 8), bringing to mind for us what I discussed earlier with respect to the obscene underside of the law and the relationship between meaning and pleasure. And it is this "stain spoiling the picture"—a concept lifted from Lacan's discussion of the anamorphic gaze in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* in *Seminar XI* that is relevant here.

For surely that stain can refer as much to the excesses of literary and generic signification in the Nigerian spam as to such typical marks as "p3nis" or words embedded in Jpegs, as well as the "material leftover circulating among the subjects" *qua* subject lines of the email themselves. It is as if Nigerian spam was already carrying out the interpenetration of picture and text, via this "stain spoiling the picture," that Goldsmith so breathlessly announces in his manifesto for conceptual writing—"visually morphed into Photoshop, animated in Flash" and so on. Here we can adjudge ourselves based on the various human and non-human readings: baroque literary qualities, impoverished, nonnative speakers, or Baysean probability of spam, are no doubt "the real letter."

But perhaps I am being disingenuous here, perhaps I am forgetting the real victims of these scams, the pensioners and other gullible Americans who pour their life savings into money orders and wire transfers. What kind of readers are there? Here, again, Lacan (and Žižek) comes to the rescue. For surely what is most puzzling about these emails is that *anyone* would fall for them: Who could be so gullible? Or, to turn it around, why are they

written in such an obvious fashion? In Lacanese, *Che vuoi?* What do you want? And this takes us to our final foray into the arcane world of Nigerian spam criticism: a research paper from a few years by Cormac Herley, a Microsoft mathematician, which uses math and logical modeling to argue that the obvious clichés and come-ons function as an effective filter to weed out the ungullible and reduce "false positives" (or people who may respond but then stop—or waste the scammers' time). The first email, Herley argues, is "effectively the attacker's classifier: it determines who responds, and thus who the scammer attacks." For the purpose of the initial email "is not so much to attract viable users as to repel the non-viable ones, who greatly outnumber them. […] The mirth which the fabulous tales of Nigerian scam emails provoke suggests that it is mostly successful in this regard."[16]

Herley reminds us that "[a]ttackers have false positives too" (1). The same problems that plague anti-spam software designers (the likelihood that the program will designate as spam what is a legitimate email about your mortgage, your dissertation on Nigerian literature, or your doctor's attempts to treat your malfunctioning penis)—or false positives—also must be taken into account by Nigerian email writers, who don't want to waste their time. It should be noted that Herley is operating purely via logic and mathematics, and not by analyzing a substantial body of emails; but what is compelling about the argument is not only how it affirms Žižek's argument that the obscene stain of the letter is what reaches the correct recipient, but also the more general notion of *Che vuoi?*, or the mirroring nature of desire: the Nigerian letter writer crafts a text that will be desired by the other—the gullible Westerner—whose desire in turn is the desire of the other within the letter itself.

But I want to stay with the phenomenon of Nigerian spam for a number of reasons. First of all, I want to think about what these texts do, or what we do to them, not just with spam filters, but when we delete them. In some ways, these deletions add another dimension to how Nigerian spam functions similar to how Kenneth Goldsmith has described conceptual writing: as texts not to be read. Here Villem Flusser is of use; mapping the shift from the desk and the stationery store to the digital age, we can think of the email that travels from a cybercafé in Lagos to your office desktop—or perhaps you are checking your email on a Sunday morning at home, from your laptop, sitting on the couch, or now you're irritated, you start without wanting to read it.

What kind of readers, what kind of reading is taking place here? First of all, we have the logic of the Baysean spam filters, which operate with a "fuzzy" or "weak" logic (unlike the binary logic of Boolean systems, such as what underwrites Google search) and therefore is a logical system that must be "trained" by the user; thus, it is a system that, as Lacan puts it in *My Teaching*,

is a basket with holes in it.[17] And then there are other readers as well: those who skim the beginning and then ignore or delete it (and think, then, of the abundance of spam—80 percent of email is spam, or so we are told—how civilization would collapse if we had to read all of that—I am reminded of Moretti again, admitting he has not read most of the Western European novels from the nineteenth century) and not only the gullible reader but also the academic or journalistic readers (the academics going on to quote from such emails for their analytic purposes, as samples), and, finally, the literary readers, for Cruikshank was not far off when he descried literary potential in Nigerian spam. Thus, we have the Nigerian novelist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, whose 2009 novel *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* deals with the world of 419 scammers in Nigeria.[18] Nwaubani's novel is a lot fun to read (she claims P.G. Wodehouse as an inspiration), yet it is evident that we have to frame the phenomenon of Nigerian spam and its textuality—a chain or stain of signifiers that is evidently a treasure trove of signifiers *qua* the big Other—in a transnational political economy—as, indeed, Pius Adesanmi laments in the Nigeria Village Square blog: "What do you do if you are writing a novel about what, for want of a better description, we must call Nigeria's 419 letters and the imaginaries that have now come to be associated with it, only to discover that those letters themselves are now being discoursed and critiqued as art forms on their own terms?"[19]

I began this chapter by arguing that in some ways Žižek does not write his books and we in turn do not read them—that, at any rate, is the logic of the Internet—as is the paradox whereby its "obscene underside" turns out, on the one hand, to be a subculture of activists (the hacker described by Coleman) and its scams are the subjects of literature. This is to argue, really, that the short circuit contained in Žižek's books—and which contain them—necessitate the return to Lacan, to a materialist psychoanalysis, to a theory that can fully account for the Event that is the Internet.

3

Was Facebook an Event?

Is the Internet an Event? Did the coming of a publicly—mass—accessible medium form, one that facilitated not only communication but cognitive interactions (to use Christian Fuch's distinction),[1] constitute a rupture with the past, a new era making possible artistic expression or political organizing or affective connections or scientific discoveries hitherto difficult or impossible? Is nothing the same after social media, after ubiquitous computing, after the Internet of things, after clouds and stacks and stacktivism?

The "Event" is one of the most contested—but also "on trend"—terms in contemporary philosophy. Developed in its modern meaning of a political change or revolution by Alain Badiou in *Being and the Event* (1988), the term was quickly taken up by Žižek in his 2000 book *The Ticklish Subject,* where he introduced the work of Badiou and Jacques Rancière, among others, to a wider Anglo-American audience (*Being and Event* was not translated into English until 2006). And it is Žižek's use and development of the term that will guide me in this discussion.[2]

Here I want to entertain this set of questions by way of discussing how Žižek has developed ideas of the Event, beginning (and staying for the most part) with his most recent, and sustained, inquiry into the concept, the 2014 book *Event: Philosophy in Transit*, Žižek discusses the Event in terms of framing, but also the fantasy as frame, the fall as Event, the retroactive question of the Truth-Event (but also illusion, the Imaginary), the importance of the subject as Event, and the possibilities of fidelity to the Event, as well as infidelity, dis-Eventalization. Thus, for example, the Event is another form of Lacan's "traversing the fantasy," but it is also a matter of frames and their doubling, leading to considerations of how interface studies itself cogitates on the frame (with such luminaries as Johanna Drucker and Alexander Galloway). Those frames determine our subjectivity, Žižek argues, via such banalities as the box we type into on our phone, the status update buttons, and, perhaps, a social media big Other, "an anxious God, dreading a decision on his own status." However, the prosthetic "lathouse" (Lacan's term for gadgets) should not misguide us into believing, as some camps of left #Accelerationism seem to, that the machinic unconscious is in control. If, in this sense, there is no big Other, does that entail a lack of fidelity to the Event,

a "diseventalization" akin to what Žižek detects, on the one hand, with such horrible documents as *The Act of Killing* (a 2012 film depicting unrepentant death squad murderers in Indonesia) and, on the other, the collapse of public and private that is so endemic in our digital present? I conclude the chapter with a vigorous argument against precisely that "diseventalization," offering first Lena Dunham's vagina-centric memoir *Not That Kind of Girl* and then the Tiqqun collective's *Theory of a Young-Girl.*

Framed by Agatha Christie

The sequence of concepts or versions of the Event outlined above—frame, fall, retroactivity—occurs for the most part in Žižek's *Event* book, published as part of Penguin books' "philosophy in transit," which featured Wolfgang Tillmans' photographs of London Tube commuters on the cover. This cover art or publishing concept is not incidental, and it is interesting how Žižek gamely plays along in the structure of his book, with various chapters as subway stops or connections, for instance, and even an opening cultural example taken from another kind of train, Agatha Christie's 1957 novel *4:50 from Paddington*:

> Elspeth McGillicuddy, on the way to visit her old friend Jane Marple, sees a woman being strangled in the compartment of a passing train … . It all happens very fast and her vision is blurred, so the police don't take Elspeth's report seriously as there is no evidence of wrongdoing; only Miss Marple believes her story and starts to investigate. This is an Event at its purest and most minimal: something shocking, out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernable causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation. (*E*, 1–2)

Now, the incident Žižek is referring to bears its own examination, for purposes that will soon become clear. The following passage is from Christie's novel:

> [McGillicuddy's] train gathered speed again. At that moment, another train, also on a downline, swerved towards them, for a moment with almost alarming effect. For a time the two trains ran parallel, now one gaining a little, now the other. Mrs. McGillicuddy looked down from her window through the windows of the parallel carriages. Most of the blinds were down, but occasionally the occupants of the carriages were

> visible. The other train was not very full and there were many empty carriages. At the moment when the two trains gave the illusion of being stationary, a blind in one of the carriages flew up with a snap. Mrs. McGillicuddy looked into the lighted first-class carriage which was only a few feet away. Then she drew her breath in with a gasp and half-rose to her feet. Standing with his back to the window and to her was a man. His hands were around the throat of a woman who faced him, and he was slowly, remorselessly, strangling her.

Mrs. McGillicuddy looked down from her window through the windows of the parallel carriages. This is an example, then, not only of an Event in all its raw, unanticipated rupture in the everyday (already prepared for us, and for Mrs. McGillicuddy, by the illusion of stasis between the two trains), but of that Event arriving with a frame, indeed with the *doubled framing* of the two train windows.

Consider, too, a scene in *The Karate Kid* where the young hero (Daniel, played by Ralph Macchio) is having a meal with his mother in a restaurant. Behind them is the restaurant window, and out that window (in a kind of reversal of Edward Hopper's famous painting *Nighthawks* [1942]) we see the hero's enemies leaving a karate studio across the street. So here we have framed, within the shot, the family unit (mother and son), and then framed, behind them, what threatens that unit (but which threat Macchio's character must defeat as, arguably, a metonym for the father figure of Pat Morita's character). This cinematic framing (through an arguably Wellesian "deep focus") is again a kind of doubling.[3] And, these frames, then, constitute the framing that, as Žižek argues in *Event*, "regulates our access to reality" (25). Framing itself constitutes an Event. So, what does this mean? And, what do these essential visual, and literary-cinematic, frames have to do with the Internet?

In his discussion of the Event as "framing, reframing, enframing" in the first chapter of *Event*, Žižek argues that philosophy deals with "the transcendental horizon, or frame, of our experience of reality" (10), that the "Event is not something that occurs within the world, but is *a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it*" (ibid., Žižek's emphasis), and then proceeds to read any number of films and novels (from Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* [2012] to his old favorite, Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* [1920]) in terms of narrative frames and the Hollywood production of the couple. (This last concept is Žižek's version of Stanley Cavell's "comedy of remarriage" that Cavell argued characterized much cinema in the classic Hollywood period—see, for more on this genealogy, the chapter on *Her*.) So an Event is the frame through which we see

the world (and which guides us in our actions in the world)—or the Event is a change in that frame, an enframing, a reframing, even a dissolution of a frame.

Such frames, then, also have a psychoanalytic name: fantasy. We need fantasies—or frames—to sustain our understanding of the world and our place in it, for example, because, as Lacan famously said, "there is no sexual relationship," in the sense that there is no dominant narrative or frame to which one can reliably turn to help one's marriage or coupledom cohere. Žižek and Lacan have much to say about the role of fantasy (most notably, that fantasy teaches us how to desire). And it is in this context that Žižek ends (his first chapter of *Event*) with Heidegger. Noting that Heidegger's word for "the essence of technology," *Gestell*, is usually translated as "enframing," or an "*attitude towards reality*," Žižek argues that when "we become aware and fully assume the fact that technology itself is, in its essence, a mode of enframing, we overcome it—this is Heidegger's version of traversing the fantasy" (*Event*, 31). But what, then, is the relationship between these terms or concepts: "frame," "Event," "fantasy," and "desire"? What is notable about an Event—what is, in Badiou's translators' awkward neologism, "Evental"—is not simply its happening, but what that Event does to our perception of the world, how the world is framed. "Everything is different," "this changes everything"—such phrases indicate, in a dim way, not that the world *qua* world (the *noumenal*, in Kantian terms) has changed, but the *phenomenon* of the world. And this brings us back to questions of the Internet.

For what is crucial to our argument here is how this (double) enframing functions in a similar way in terms of digital devices, interfaces, and social media. There is always a framing that is simultaneously the Thing or the object (the stuff that is the phone or tablet or laptop, etc.) and the virtual (the images, code, and visual). Take my rather ordinary, oldish, iPhone 4, for example, which I have owned for a couple of years now. When I want to, say, go onto Facebook, I first must push the small button at the bottom of the phone, a circle with a square inside it. Then I swipe the unlock slide, enter in my passcode, and am confronted with a few screens worth of apps (of icons for apps). I press on the Facebook "f," then the status button (which is itself an icon of a pen on a slant in a box, as if writing paper). Or, if I just want to read my friends' status updates, I start scrolling through, phone in my left hand, thumb moving from bottom to top of the screen.

The phone itself constitutes the first frame. It is a physical frame (the Internet is a thing, an object). What is "in" or "on" the screen—icons, boxes, images—then is the second frame. This second frame may be multiple (frames within frames) but their virtuality/visuality, I argue, makes them a

One, one frame, in counter-distinction to the other One frame, that of the device.

But before we even proceed with this argument, return to that phrase that we use in English—"I go onto Facebook." Or: I go onto the Internet. I go *on*line. What is the spatiality, or the flatness, of the digital, of the Internet or apps or our devices, that makes us conceptualize it as that surface? Is the Event already a surface? A friend discusses—on Facebook—his shattered smartphone screen, the splinters of glass in his fingertips even as he lets us know about that Event, the Event of the shattered phone, that "fragile absolute."

Once again, two frames

So the digital, the Internet, is an Evental frame in the spatial manner that changes our relation to the world. And so we sit on trains or park benches hunched over our devices. Does this isolate us, remove us from our surrounds? Surely—although whether it does so any more than if we are reading a newspaper or a novel, I am not certain. What may help us here is to continue to read Žižek on the question of frames, and doubled frames in particular. In his book on the Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski, a slim volume called *The Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek describes an impromptu theory of the "two frames" that he came up with at "an art round table": "the frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame; there is another, invisible frame, implied by the structure of the painting, which frames our perception of the painting, and these two frames do not overlap—there is an invisible gap separating the two" (*FRT*, 5). Žižek then, after discussing this concept further, declares that he was dismayed that his "total bluff" of an idea was then taken up by the other participants in the round table (whom he is polite enough not to mention). In many ways this feeling is familiar to many of Žižek's readers: it is nothing more than the embarrassment we all feel, as intellectuals, when we riff on an idea and then witness its success. Somehow, we believe, an idea or concept or interpretation must be sweated over, not arrived at "spontaneously." Is not the fundamental fantasy of left-liberal intellectuals that we are "cultural workers"? A mechanic does not suddenly fix a transmission, or a baker does not suddenly make a cake, then how can we suddenly come up with an idea, an analysis? Nonetheless, Žižek, toward the end of *The Fright of Real Tears*, returns to this idea of the two frames, adding that "[t]he pivotal content of the painting is not rendered in its visible part, but is located in this dislocation of the two frames, in

the gap that separates them" (*FRT*, 130), connecting painting with film (he mentions Edward Hopper's art, "where it seems as if the picture's frame has to be redoubled with a window-frame," returning us, perhaps, to our *Karate Kid* example).

Matthew Flisfeder, in his book on Žižek and film,[4] remarks that we should take Žižek's second instance of the theory seriously, arguing that Žižek merely maintains a "cynic's distance" from the first as a form of "ideological belief" (102). Žižek makes a similar argument in *Less than Nothing*:

> my procedure here perfectly illustrated the point I was (and am) repeatedly trying to make apropos of today's predominant attitude of cynicism and not-taking-oneself-seriously … Even when a subject mocks a certain belief, this in no way undermines the belief's symbolic efficacy—the belief often continues to determine the subject's activity. When we make fun of an attitude, the truth is often in this attitude, not in the distance we take towards it. (87)[5]

Flisfeder makes another point with respect to Žižek's two frames, arguing that "the two frames, the visible and the invisible, represent the relation between the Symbolic and the Imaginary in Lacanian psychoanalysis—between the apparent content and the obscene supplemental underside, and the gap between them is the Real, or the place of the subject" (102).

These discussions of frames and doubled frames can help us in our question of the Event of the Internet—or even, as my chapter title asks, "Was Facebook an Event?" To think of the Internet or Facebook as an Event is first of all, then, to argue that our digital interfaces frame our understanding of the world. Which seems fairly uncontroversial as a thesis. And, then, it is to argue that, as Žižek puts it in *The Parallax View*, when, seven years after *The Fright of Real Tears*, he expands on the notion of the frames, the "frame is always-already redoubled: the frame within 'reality' is always linked to another frame enframing 'reality' itself" (*PV*, 29). This "gap between reality and appearance," Žižek argues, means that reality appears to be itself, with a minimal gap, a "minimal difference" (*PV*, 30). This "always-already redoubling" is demonstrated perfectly in Gertrude Stein's modernist classic *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). An early scene is set in Stein's salon. Alfy Maurer, "an old habitué of the house," defends Cézanne's paintings: "Of course you can tell it is a finished picture, he used to explain to other american painters who came and looked dubiously, you can tell because it has a frame, now whoever heard of anybody framing a canvas if the picture isn't finished?" (Kindle loc. 216). Here Stein implicitly connects the physical frame of the painting with the institutional framing of art itself

(a contested struggle within the book, with its situating of Stein's salon versus the great modernist upheavals then ongoing in Paris).

So, to return to my iPhone, there is the visual frame that is the way in which the interface (of the operating system, with its passcodes and icons and comment fields) is structured. And then there is the physical, or haptic, or thingness, frame of the digital device itself, the "handheld device," which we touch and carry around and drop and occasionally plug in to recharge to connect "to the Internet." And these constitute, *qua* redoubled frame, an Event, a frame or fantasy of our perception, of our desire, of how we see and act upon the world. But—then—it is the *gap* between these frames, between the virtual frame and the physical frame, where the Event actually occurs. For this is where, as Flisfeder puts it, we emerge as subjects. And, as we will find out later in our reading of Žižek's *Event*, "the true Event is the Event of subjectivity itself … the status of subjectivity itself is Evental" (*E*, 76).

And so, just as Žižek argues that there exists an invisible gap between the two frames, in a similar fashion, Scott McCloud has argued that comics are an "invisible art," that the interpretive actions of readers take place "in the gutter" or between the panels (frames) of the graphic narrative (*Understanding Comics*, 1993). Johanna Drucker has most productively moved from that specific site of the frame to the digital interface. Arguing that "we have moved from a traditional discussion of graphical formats as elements of *mise en page* to a sense that we are involved with a *mise en scene* or *système*" ("Humanities Approaches to Interface Theory," *Culture Machine* 12, 2011, 7), Drucker nonetheless steers clear of what Alex Galloway identifies as the sense of "windows, screens, keyboards, kiosks, channels, sockets, and holes" as thresholds (*The Interface Effect*).

Here again we see the same doubled frames—the frame of the virtual, the interface as software and images and icons (McCloud and Drucker), and the frame as, in the second half of Galloway's list, the holes and plugs and objects that enable or hold those virtual frames. Drucker is surely correct to critique how interface studies has been "substituting the idea of a 'user' for that of a 'subject'" (1), echoing Jodi Dean's assertion that "the matter of the Internet has less to do with bits, screens, code, protocol, and fiber-optic cable than it does with people" ("The Real Internet," 212). These lists, however, in Galloway and Dean (let's bring them together: windows, screens, keyboards, kiosks, channels, sockets, holes, bits, screens, code, protocol) are symptomatic of what in Object-Oriented Ontology is called the "Latour Litany," or the list of objects which intends to demonstrate some hitherto unanticipated partition or barrier that is, presumably, independent of subjectivity.[6] For example, later in *The Interface Effect*, Galloway argues that, as the society of control replaces the society of spectacle, and the lens replaces the mirror (or, in his more

ornate vocabulary, the dioptric replaces the catoptric), the very invisibility and transparent operability of the interface is its own worst enemy: "frames, windows, doors, and other thresholds are those transparent devices that achieve more the less they do" (25). This sounds not a little Orwellian, both in terms of its ominousness and in a resemblance to the declaration, in "Why I Write," that "good prose is like a windowpane" (even if Galloway is, arguably, being descriptive rather than prescriptive). This is not to say that Galloway is not correct, but perhaps that it is worth looking at those fails of the systems, those gaps between the frames, rather than focusing on the big Other of an overarching system of control.

There are two additional comments worth making on Drucker and Galloway here. First, Drucker seems to retain a residual nostalgia for the humanist subject; second, Galloway's (or OOO's) list also helps us to think about barriers and limits in a properly Marxist fashion. Drucker's critique of how the language of the "task-oriented and efficiency driven" software industry ("prototype," "user feedback," and "deliverables" are some of her examples) is part of her ongoing argument that inquiry into the machine can and should take account of the critical language and methodology of the humanities (she specifically mentions Stephen Heath, Theresa de Lauretis, and Paul Smith: Drucker 1). But perhaps a theory of the subject can also incorporate a theory of the user, or, rather, a theory of the subject (in the full-blown Žižekian sense of the subject as gap, lack, failure, obscene, and uncanny) should overidentify with the user, with the neoliberal consumer.

Then, Galloway's version of the "Latour litany" suggests we return to Ian Bogost (whose work I engage with more thoroughly below) to understand what is at stake with such rhetorical devices. The problem with such lists, Bogost declares, is that they are made by humans; thus, he offers a "Latour Litanizer" (kindle loc. 1658) to more randomly generate lists: "By divorcing the author and reader from the selection process, the litanizer amplifies both the variety and types of units that exist and the variety of alliances between them. The diversity and density of tiny ontology seems out from these litanies, both individually and (especially) when taken together" (1677).[7] But I would offer that there is more going on here than a heroic OOO discovery of tiny ontologies. What is also at stake here is a fundamental principle of capital, as described by Marx in *The Grundrisse*. In Notebook IV, chapter 8, Marx describes any number of barriers to capital, both internal and external: surplus value, production, consumption. A key passage is the following:

> The tendency to create the *world market* is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome. Initially,

> to subjugate every moment of production itself to exchange and to suspend the production of direct use values not entering into exchange, i.e. precisely to posit production based on capital in place of earlier modes of production, which appear primitive [*naturwüchsig*] from its standpoint. *Commerce* no longer appears here as a function taking place between independent productions for the exchange of their excess, but rather as an essentially all-embracing presupposition and moment of production itself.[8]

"Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome." For Marxism, then, capital is seen to be overcoming, exceeding, limits: Is this not, arguably, what is at work with the OOO concept of contingent ontologies emerging from such a list that overcomes the barriers between objects? So too, then, the necessity of a transcendental dialectics, which nonetheless still posits the double frame, the virtual and the material. For it is no expert less than David Harvey who has argued the relevance of this insight of *The Grundrisse* to the present-day economic crises: spatial fixes, for example, are one way in which capital will leave behind a certain terrain or territory (the expensive labor markets of the first world) for other, more lucrative, regions.[9]

Traversing the fantasy of the Internet

But let us bring the discussion back to how Žižek also, in *Event*, in his discussion of framing, enframing, and reframing, connects the frame as Event to the frame as fantasy. Does this mean that fantasy is an Event? And what does Žižek mean by saying that we need to overcome this enframing, we need to "traverse the fantasy" of technology? These are two sets of questions—what is fantasy and what does it mean to traverse it? First of all, then, in the Lacanian-Žižekian tradition, fantasy is not merely an illusion, or a daydream; rather, it is more fundamental to our everyday life. Fantasy both structures our reality, our identity (I am a man of a certain age and profession, I have certain hobbies or books that I have read or political activities that I have undertaken, I live in a certain country and have an intimate partner, a child, etc.), *and* structures our desire. And these things are connected: as a university professor, I have certain desires (how I teach and do research, for promotion or for effect in my community). And the fantasy that structures my desire, that teaches me what or how to desire, then is centered on an *objet petit a:* the object of my desire, this "little bit of the Real," that which is "in you more than you." The Lacanian formula or matheme for desire is $<>*a*. I am

constituted as a subject (as a barred subject, a divided or split subject, hence $) in relation to (the lozenge or <> denotes moving to and away from, or even circling around …) the *objet petit a.*

So, to move to global politics, if 9/11 was an Event, if the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City was an Event (and surely most would agree it was), which reconstituted the "frame" for New Yorkers and Americans and, equally tragically, for many people in Afghanistan and Iraq, as an Event it introduced a new fantasy, and hence a new *objet petit a:* the terrorist, the Arab as terrorist, the Islamic terrorist, and so on. But—and here is the difficulty—one does not simply educate oneself (the Muslims are after all nice people; I know an Arab, she is very peaceful, like you and me), for one can argue that as surely as conservatives have, since 9/11, inherited the fantasy of the Arab-terrorist, on the other side of the political spectrum, on the right, this is just met by a fantasy around, say, George Bush, or Tony Blair, or their latter-day versions, who now are the *objet petit a* for the leftist fantasy. So there is no "traversing of the fantasy" if one merely exchanges Islamophobia for Bushphobia.

A caveat here: I am not saying that the *effect* of such fantasies are the same—the invasion of Iraq, the long occupation of Afghanistan, the hardening of the state surveillance systems, all a result of the fantasy of Arab or Muslim terrorism, possess a much more nefarious (and violent, harmful) effect than leftist Bush-hating (which mostly seems to result in university professors muttering under their breath during question and answer periods in front of large undergraduate classes—or venting on social media).

Žižek connects the question of the "frame" and the *objet petit a* in a slightly earlier discussion of the Hollywood "production of the couple" in *Less than Nothing* (654–656). One feature of the *objet petit a*, he says there, is that it designates what is taken from, or subtracted from, reality (he is riffing off Badiou here as well—I discuss Badiouan subtraction at more length below)—and reality gains its consistence precisely from this subtraction, this loss. But this subtraction does not mean a withdrawal. For Žižek's program is quite clear: we do not traverse the fantasy, we do not overcome the enframing, by "transcending" it, by going on a Facebook cleanse or requiring, like the proverbial millionaire at his wedding, that everyone leave their smartphones outside: "while it may seem obvious that psychoanalysis should liberate us from the hold of idiosyncratic fantasies and enable us to confront reality the way it is, this is precisely what Lacan does *not* have in mind: traversing the fantasy does not mean simply going outside the fantasy, but shattering its foundations, accepting its inconsistency" (*E*, 28). And, slightly earlier, he remarks that "to break out of the Hollywood frame is thus not to treat the Thing as just a metaphor of family tension, but to accept it in its meaningless and impenetrable presence" (16).

Rejecting or claiming to have eluded the frame in which social media or digital devices operate (which is to say the double frame, the virtual and the material frames)—would only be delusional, for two reasons. First, as argued above, such a move only results in another frame (hence the commonplace fetishes today of the artisanal, the handmade or DIY, the organic or local), another *objet petit a*—and the structure of fantasy would remain intact. Secondly—and this is a broader claim of Žižek's—the frame requires precisely this fantasy of not believing. Again this argument breaks down into two: first, the long-standing claim of Žižek that ideology requires a minimal distance or cynical disavowal. For our very "passionate (dis)attachment" allows us to enjoy our devices and apps even as we misrecognize the very conditions for that enjoyment.

Secondly, that very "minimal distance," or the *difference* between the two frames, is where our gap or lack as subjects is founded. Think of when you purchase a new phone or tablet or computer. For a time, it is exciting—a new fetish object to slip into your pocket or casually open on a café table, hook up to a projector in the lecture hall, etc. But once all of your apps and programs and music and files have been restored from the cloud—isn't it now boring? Old wine in new bottles, etc. Or, consider the opposite. You find a great new app—one that allows you to find a rental car, or get a hot new date, or listen to the BBC *anywhere.* Again, excitement, fetishization for a while, and then—well, still got the crap phone, don't you? The chipped edge or that crack your thumb keeps getting caught on, the duct tape peeling off where you stuck it over the Apple logo on your laptop, the slowly rotting power cord—they haven't changed. App didn't do anything about that. New wine in an old bottle, and so on.

So, what to do? Instead of this *acting out*, one can traverse the fantasy of the digital by accepting its "inconsistency," its "meaningless and impenetrable presence," which is to say, as Žižek has argued for the past twenty years, to engage in the "over-identification" with ideology (with fantasy, with the frame), as he calls for in *The Plague of Fantasies*, referring to Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*, "whose hero wreaks total havoc by simply executing the orders of his superiors in an overzealous and all-too-literal way" (*PF*, 29).[10] And so, in *Less than Nothing*, Žižek argues: "The ideologico-political dimension of this notion of 'traversing the fantasy' was made clear by the unique role the rock group *Top lista nadrealista* (*The Top List of the Surrealists*) played during the Bosnian war … they daringly mobilized all the clichés about 'stupid Bosnians'" (690).

This strategy of overidentification, as Suzana Milevska has argued, is not without its perils—or, rather, we might say, an overidentification with overidentification. For example, a common instance offered in accounts of

overidentification is a poster design by the Yugoslavian New Collectivism group in 1987 on the occasion of Tito's birthday. When it turned out that the design borrowed heavily from Nazi imagery in the 1930s, the "resulting scandal raised questions about symbolic formations operating through the ideological state apparatuses, and that 'Youth Day' turned out to be the last."[11] However, in her discussion of Žižek's development of the strategy in the context of 1980s and 1990s Slovene art (particularly the Laibach punk rock group and the IRWIN/NSK art movements), Milevska debunks heroic notions of dissident art, pointing out that "[o]ne thing that Žižek gets right … is that there was mostly no life/death threat for either the state or for intellectual and art projects. They were often regarded as harmless or simply overlooked by the communist party."[12] Overidentification, like so much parody or pastiche, Milevska argues, is in the end just ineffectual.

A pervert's guide to social media

There is an obscure, barely watched video on YouTube called "Žižek reacts to the Internet"—it has only had 20,000 views, which is nothing, and I doubt if anyone reading this text has seen it besides me. In the video, an actor (Kyle Shire), wearing gray sweats and a (fake) beard, watches a video of a cat playing the keyboard (a video which is *very* well known, and to compare, it has had over thirty-seven million views). The parody is good, it's fine, and it's not as good as the Slovenian comedian Klemen Slakonja's video "The Perverted Dance (Cut The Balls)." The fake Žižek talks about Hitchcock and the commodity, and soon. But he gets it wrong, a minute or so in, when he says that "this cat *must believe* the music comes from him." The cat, he humorously argues, is the duped one, like the consumer or those pacified by mass culture, and so we must engage in an ideology critique like in the good old days of Adorno and Horkheimer. But I think this analysis (if it can be called that) is exactly wrong, or backward: because the cat *does not have to believe*; only we, like the fake Žižek, have to *suppose* that he believes. The cat is the "cat supposed to believe," and, as such, is a perfect example of the Lacanian subject. This is the next way in which we can think about the Internet today, in terms of the "Event" of the subject.

To begin, then, with this supposed subject: Robert Pfaller provides a very clear outline of this notion of interpassivity—he connects it to fetishistic disavowal—in his book *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, where he argues that we delegate our pleasure to an Imaginary other: to put it into our digital language, onto the subject supposed to LOL. When we type LOL in a

Facebook comment or when we are texting a friend, are we really or actually laughing out loud? Probably not. So, why do we type it? We type it as a way to transfer our pleasure, our enjoyment, our *jouissance* (think of the more extreme versions: LMFAO, or laughing my fucking ass off; ROFL, or rolling on the floor laughing) onto—what? The digital interface, the subjectivity of the digital. Facebook laughs out loud so we do not have to, so we are not overly disturbed by our *jouissance*. Now, we know very well that social media is not laughing out loud, and yet we act as if it is. Or, Pfaller says, our knowledge that Facebook is not laughing out loud *makes it possible* for us to pretend, to believe, that it is. But there is more here.

What I am saying here is that everything we hate about the Internet, about Facebook, is what is Evental about the Internet, especially insofar as it underlines our subjectivity, constitutes it. So, the subject is supposed, and that subject then is the Event of the Internet. Let's unpack that argument. On the one hand, subjectivity—and this is very basic Lacanian psychoanalysis, very uncontroversial I think—based on the notion of others believing, is the interpassive subject. But—and this is something that Žižek often argues in terms of Stalinism—the leaders would not believe in socialism, and all they required was "the masses supposed to believe," who would do the believing for them. And—the further twist—even the masses did not have to believe, for that supposition, that interpassivity, to work, they merely had to be "supposed to believe" (Pfaller). This, I believe, is where Katarina Peović Vuković's argument leads when she talks about social media as "mechanisms of 'productive desire,'"[13] although I am perhaps disagreeing with her analysis when I argue that the desire that is produced here helps us to better understand the Event of the subject.

Žižek works out this argument in *Absolute Recoil*. Discussing theology, he references Kierkegaard on the medieval scholastic philosopher Simon Tornacensis. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard notes that Tornacensis "thought that God must be obliged to him for having furnished a proof of the Trinity … This story has numerous analogies, and in our time speculation has assumed such authority that it has practically tried to make God feel uncertain of himself, like a monarch who is anxiously waiting to learn whether the general assembly will make him an absolute or a limited monarch."[14] As Žižek notes, Kierkegaard's or Tornacensis' is a "properly dialectical mediation of knowing and being in which all being hinges on (not-) knowing" (*AR*, 273), and *not* "the standard humanist insight that 'the gods are only projections of human desires, fears and ideals'" (if this were so, Žižek adds, then the human would be "a full subject" alienated from the divine Other). But Žižek pushes past Kierkegaard, arguing that the Danish proto-existentialist's philosophy cannot quite accept "the wonderful image

of an anxious God, dreading a decision on his own status" (*AR*, 274). "His own status—," why not? His own *status update* is as if God had uttered some witticism on Facebook, and was nervously waiting for "likes," for Simon Tornacensis to add a comment below. This is where our subjectivity emerges in digital culture, in social media, as the "subject supposed to like": or, as Žižek puts it: "Our conclusion here should be that *every subject is ultimately in the position of Tornacensis' God,* forever in anxiety as to what will happen if others stop believing in them, presupposing them as a subject (for Lacan the subject as such is a presupposed subject)" (*AR*, 274). This is to say, and perhaps I am repeating myself, the Event of the subject *qua* Internet is the moment when we have entered our status, we are waiting for the first like or comment. This is a true, authentic subjectivity, made possible thanks to Facebook. Or, rather, by reflecting on that moment, we can understand the Lacanian-Žižekian theory of the subject.

The digital unconscious

Žižek is talking about precisely this relationship or problematic with respect to our digital devices, our digital civilization (the title of a lecture),[15] which he connects to Lacan's idea of the *lathouse*, as a way to help us to think about our "excessive" relationship to digital or networked technology, and what that excess tells us about political liberatory thought. Žižek begins with Freud, from *Civilization and its Discontents*: "Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times. … But in the interests of our present investigation, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his God-like character" (SE **XXI**, 91–92). Now, these prostheses are our digital devices. They are prosthetic humans, which is to say, following Lévi-Strauss' logic, human:digital::god:man, or the human is to the digital as god is to man—which is to say, supplanted. Just as our technology once helped us to supplant the role of god, today tech helps us to supplant ourselves.[16]

Before Žižek makes this extrapolation, he quickly points out that today's "prosthetic Gods" are superheroes, and that the title of a recent Superman film, *Man of Steel*, is also the English translation of Stalin (*AR*, 277). This is only a quick titbit before Žižek moves on to Stephen Hawking, Kant, and the pleasure principle. And yet perhaps the subject matter of concern here—comic books heroes—is, in the sense of the Russian formalists' "motivated device," not innocent. Anyone who grew up reading Marvel comics in the

1960s and 1970s can well remember the way in which such comics frequently featured intrusions by the editor in the form of small comments boxed into the corner or bottom of a panel. These comments could be a reference to the comic's ongoing narrative, a quick jab at the action in the panel, and the like. Perhaps we can see a similarity between such incessant metacommentary in the popular and the global style to be found in Žižek's texts? One could argue that the *form* of Žižek's writing, his digressionary/shotgun approach, *is an academic-theoretic version of* Marvel's "*ed. notes*." Which means two things: it embodies his subjectivity *qua* neurotic *and* academics who find his approach too scattered obviously have not read comics for the last fifty years.

Or perhaps it is the other way around. Žižek likes to riff on Jameson's "famous analysis of Hemingway in which he pointed out that Hemingway did not write short terse sentences in order to render the isolated heroic individuality of his heroes—form comes first, he invented the isolated heroic individuality to be able to write in a certain way." In *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek argues first that Schoenberg did not turn to atonality to express "the extremes of morbid hysterical violence; he chose the theme of hysteria because it fitted atonal music" (*AR*, 169), and, later, that in the film *Gravity*, "the minimal narrative elements are there to enable Cuarón to stage the formal experience of floating in space" (*AR*, 354). Following Žižek/Jameson's logic, then, we could say that Žižek writes about superheroes, or cyberspace, or indeed popular culture *and* German idealism as a way to work out his neuroses.

Now, the preceding reversal can no doubt be seen as my own overidentification with Žižek's method, but I think that beyond that what is more productive is to maintain his dialectics, and to be able to detect a connection that is also an antagonism between, in this case, Žižek's formal, scattershot method, and his rambling content (the political, the popular, the artistic, and the digital). So, on the one hand, I am arguing in favor of that method possessing a dialectics, and *contra* Christian Fuch's argument, in his review of *Absolute Recoil*, that Žižek's theory is too postmodern to be properly dialectical.[17] But, and to return to the specifics of the digital, and earlier arguments in this chapter with respect to the frame and the gap, and my critique of Drucker for still holding on to a humanist subject, it is precisely in the digital frame (or, more exactly, between the digital frames), as with the comics' editorial comments (and thus Žižek's form) that a Lacanian-psychoanalytic subject emerges. The Event of Žižek's form, to put it bluntly, is the Event of the Internet.

Extending this interpretation to the present, Žižek declares *contra* Bruno Latour that we have always been modern, just didn't know it (Lacan: god was already dead, he just didn't know it)—the unconscious. Žižek cites Jean-Pierre Dupuy to the effect that the technological dream is not to be a god,

but to be surprised, is not to dominate nature, but to create a new nature/life. And this new nature/life (digital, technology) is excessive, embodies our horror, which is the horror at the lamella (aka *l'hommelette,* an early version in Lacan of *objet petit a*). It is not the technophilia Žižek is interested in, but Ludditism, which in turn is more symptomatic—or the relation with technological/artificial organisms, a fear of the obscene undead-ness, asexual reproduction of tech. "If Lacan's *les lathouses* [are] consumerist object-gadgets which attract the libido with their promise to deliver excessive pleasure [or an excess of the social], but which effectively reproduce only the lack itself," then, citing Mladen Dolar on the telephone, Žižek declares that "technology is a catalyzer, [which] enlarges and enhances something which is already here … a fantasmatic virtual fact" (*Event*, 63).

In this regard, Žižek mentions Lacan's "lathouse" (*Seminar, XI*)—"an object that is made up of enjoying substance," almost a *sinthome*, that which did not exist before technology: cell phones, air conditioning, artificial hearts, and excessive objects (*das Ding*). These are variously surplus: surplus objects (science, but also OOO), surplus value (market but also Marxism), and surplus enjoyment (sex, but also neoliberalism or the late capitalist superego's demand that you enjoy). This is to say, in various ways, that these are all talking about the *objet petit a*, the imperfection that works and is crucial/constitutive. For Žižek, then (or my extrapolation from his comments), digital devices are objects that exceed themselves, that embody our horror, our psychic investment or cathexis; they give us not just something to desire, but *qua* fantasy, they teach us how to desire.

So, two questions: What is the *lathouse* and how does it relate to the Internet *qua* Event? Developed in Lacan's *Seminar XVII: L'envers de psychanalyse*, the *lathouse* refers to the typical gadgets of modern science, conceived as prosthetics (hence Žižek's citation of Freud), but not, as Tomšič argues,[18] the traditional prosthetic, which replaces a missing body part (as in the prosthetic lenses in my eyes, which treated my cataracts); rather, the Freudian or Lacanian prosthetic, the *lathouse,* presupposes a libidinal body, a postmaterialist body (153). This is the body of the Event *qua* subject.

For Žižek, the Event is that which reframes our perception, introduces a new Master-Signifier. Referring back to both David's *Death of Marat* and to Facebook, that frame or empty screen of the David painting, the comment field on a blog or social media (the comment field is the commons—but it is also the Evental site of our subjectivity *qua* vanishing mediator), the Event of the Internet then is that empty field, is our subjectivity as that which only comes into being via the desire of the Other—or, rather, via traversing the fantasy, via realizing that there is no big Other. The logic works in the following way: first, the subject as Event is a flickering, evanescent subject,

an Imaginary subject, the *Fragile Absolute* that is the cracked iPhone screen, the SnapChat image which disappears (although it does not), the Selfie that is both a mirror stage and a lens craft (in the language of Alex Galloway), "the Hegelian-Lacanian subject as vanishing mediator," always transitional, too late or too soon, due to the traversing of the fantasy. We traverse the fantasy—this is the Event—when we realize that there is no big Other, that some ideal or greatness—from the Nation-Thing to Jimmy Savile, from one's football team to Facebook, from Mubarak to Obama—has fallen, it lacks.

Žižek contra #Accelerationism

Žižek argues in *Absolute Recoil:*

> Alienation is "overcome" when the subject experiences that "there is no big Other" (Lacan), that its status is that of a semblance, its character inconsistent and antagonistic. This, however, does not mean that the subject reappropriates the big Other: rather, the subject's lack with regard to the Other is transposed into the big Other itself. Such a redoubling of the lack, this overlapping of my lack with the lack in the Other itself, does not cancel the lack— on the contrary, what the subject experiences is that the lack/gap in the (substantial) Other is the condition of possibility, the site, of the subject itself. What this implies is that there is a gap prior to alienation: alienation does not introduce a gap or loss into a pre- existing organic unity, on the contrary, *it covers up the gap in the Other*. In alienation, the subject experiences the Other as the full agent running the show, as the one who "has it" (what the subject is lacking), i.e., the illusion of alienation is the same as the illusion of transference— that the Other knows. (Dis-alienation is thus basically the same move as the fall of the subject-supposed-to-know at the end of the analytic process.) (*AR*, 346)

Just to start at the end of this paragraph, the "fall of the subject-supposed-to-know" is that moment I was just describing as traversing the fantasy, realizing that the big Other is simply, as Žižek begins *Absolute Recoil*, "inconsistent, self-contradictory, thwarted, traversed by antagonisms, without any guarantee ('there is no Other of Other'), in short, the big Other is not some kind of substantial Master who secretly pulls the strings but a stumbling malfunctioning machinery" (*AR*, 21).

This is where we part company with Mohammed Salemy, Reza Negarestani, and the left #Accelerationist tendency, which celebrates the inhuman/machinic tendencies of late capitalism but does not see those ruptures within capital as themselves another "stumbling malfunctioning machinery." See, for example, the following statement by Mohammed Salemy:

> Inmachinism is the extended practical elaboration of machinism; it is born out of a diligent commitment to the project of machinism. As a universal select all/delete button that erases the self-portrait of machine made with pixels, inmachinism is a vector of revision. It relentlessly revises what it means to be a machine by removing its supposed evident characteristics and preserving certain invariances.[19]

This is not to say that the #Accelerationist philosophy is wrongheaded or inaccurate in its description of our relation to the big Other, or what is, as Negarestani calls it, the "universal telephonic-computational paradigm."[20] However, the very notion of inmachinism (which, Salemy notes, is a reversal of Negarestani's "inhumanism") as "a vector of revisionism" elides how this subject "relentlessly revises what it means to be a machine by removing its supposed evident characteristics and preserving certain invariances" in two important senses: first, the neurotic or hysteric repetition embodied in this relentless revision; second, the division between the "supposed evident characteristics" (which are discarded, or perhaps only disabled, disavowed) and the "certain invariances." What is it that is invariant in the inmachinic? Are we talking about hardware versus software, or malware versus the cloud, or the stack versus the memory stick?

And so, to return to our explication of Žižek's account of the insubstantial big Other, the "stumbling machinery" is this not how we feel? Is this not the Event, when, for example, we realize that our desires, our ugly feelings, our affects have been manipulated by Facebook? Think back to the news story that broke in June 2014 that researchers had manipulated newsfeeds and tracked emotional responses: typical comments (from Twitter and *The Atlantic)* included: "I guess Big Brother is done with just watching," the Facebook "transmission of anger" experiment is terrifying, and so on.

So let's break it down following Žižek's logic. First, "Alienation is 'overcome' when the subject experiences that 'there is no big Other' (Lacan), that its status is that of a semblance, its character inconsistent and antagonistic." The subject experiences that Facebook is not the big Other, is not the guarantor of one's connections, is not the "Subject supposed to know," and, instead, is inconsistent. The reason, I would argue, that this Event is so traumatic is because we experience Facebook precisely as our analyst, as the subject

supposed to know. Think of the various ways in which it asks us how we are feeling, what is going on, etc. Is this not the way a shrink begins the session? What do you want to talk about this week? How are you feeling? Indeed, even the *blank field itself*—like the silence of the orthodox Lacanian analyst—is such a provocation. So Facebook hystericizes us, which is why we need, I argue, a "pervert's guide to Facebook," which, like the pervert's guides to cinema and ideology, teaches the pervert—he who believes in the big Other, thinks he or she knows that the big Other desires—teaches the pervert, that is, how social media hystericizes us, makes us question our own desire, leading to that Event.

Here I am also talking about what is now called "interface studies," or the academic inquiry into the graphic design of user interfaces in telecomputational universalism. And this certainly is a field in which Žižek's notion of the "frame" *qua* Event can be put to use—whether in terms of the empty field, or a Heideggerian *Gestell* (framing and technology), or Johanna Drucker's references to graphic novel and comic's gaps between the frames. We would have to distinguish between the virtual frames on the screen (boxes, windows, "fields," and things you click and type and wipe like a child's runny nose) and the frames of the devices themselves, the mobiles and tablets and laptops, their immaterial materiality. And in our very enthrallment to these devices, these frames, therein lies the potential for a kind of genuine liberatory act, Žižek argues, for the "paradox of technology as the concluding moment of Western metaphysics is that it is a mode of enframing which poses a danger to enframing itself: the human being reduced to an object of technological manipulation is no longer properly human; it loses the very feature of being ecstatically open to reality" (*E*, 31).

This "moment" is where Žižek's revision of Althusser is relevant: the subject does not exist as hailed by the police (or by Facebook): rather, the subject (an uncanny subject, an obscene subject, a *vanishing mediator* or "subject-before-subjectivization") exists before the hailing or interpellation by the "immaterial materiality" of the big Other, and the subject exists when the big Other is not clear, is transparently opaque: "It is not clear to the subject exactly what the big Other wants from her ('Che vuoi?')" (*AR*, 64). This is what Žižek means when he says that "*The Hegelian-Lacanian subject is the ultimate 'vanishing mediator'*" (loc 3939, 190): this subject appears in our unease with Facebook manipulation, before it is "gentrified" via symbolic identification, as we disavow our ambivalence (whatever I was dreaming about, it was not Facebook).

Another way of thinking about this traversing of the fantasy, this mode of enframing, is arguably when a beloved media or national-popular figure is shown to have concealed some dark secret: I am thinking of revelations of

sexual assault for such figures as the British radio personality Jimmy Savile, the US football coach Joe Paterno, and the Canadian radio announcer Jian Gomeshi. In all of these cases, it was not only that the figures were connected to important institutions (public broadcasters, a college), but they were also part of the hegemonic entertainment industry (music, sports): or what Lacan refers to as "the demand to enjoy." Thus, it turns out that the official institutions were complicit in some way in turning a blind eye to the offenders, and, further, that the accusations (with all the problems that accusations have because of such ideologies of blaming the victim) require a reassessment of one's relation to those demands, to the big Other. This social phenomenon should be distinguished from what Žižek calls the "leader-with-pants-down" syndrome, where a populist right-wing politician is accused of drunkenness or fascist roots and the like: here, supporters of the accused identify with the leader's symbolic identification and do not examine their own desires.

How to betray the Event

I want to continue this discussion with two trains of thought: first, to reach back to an earlier moment with Žižek engaged with the concept of the Event in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999); and second, to relate this and today's discussion to what Žižek calls the "undoing" of the Event, its *rückgänig machen* or *Ungeshehenmachen*, all by way of introducing the idea that Žižek constitutes an authentic Event in the current academic production of theory. Here is how Žižek describes the Event in *The Ticklish Subject* with respect to truth, contingency, and a critique of the current *doxa:* "The Event is the Truth of the situation that makes visible/legible what the 'official' situation had to 'repress', but it is always localized—that is to say, the Truth is always the Truth *of* a specific situation" (*TS*, 130). This is Žižek's theory of the contingency of the Event—the Event emerges *ex nihilo*, Žižek adds. But it is also a rejoinder to the historicism that seeks to gentrify any Event by "placing it in historical context" and thereby avoiding the trauma of the Real (see, in this regard, Žižek's argument in *The Plague of Fantasies* that fantasy seeks to place lack into a narrative—hence lack becomes loss).[21]

Key, too, to Žižek's description of the Event is, first, that subjectivity emerges in relation to the Event—one is a subject in terms of one's fidelity to the truth of the Event. Thus, truth is subjective *not* because it is relative or multiple, but because it is realized in the subject.[22] Then, he provides a taxonomy of three ways in which one can betray the Event (rather like his taxonomy of "Freud's

four *Vers-*" in *Less Than Nothing*): "simple disavowal, the attempt to follow old patterns as if nothing had happened, just a minor disturbance … false imitation of the Event of Truth … and a direct 'ontologicization' of the Event of the Truth, its reduction to a new positive order of being" (*TS*, 149–150).

This taxonomy is a useful way in which to think about the various reactions to or critique of Žižek's project. The disavowal (Žižek's example, if the Event is the October revolution, would be liberal democracy) would be surely the reaction of the great majority of academic discourse (including the academic left): thus, we know that Žižek's work is only popular because it is simplistic, he is a charlatan, let us get on with explicating this text or narrating the circumstances of that historical figure. The false imitation of the Event (for Žižek, the Fascist "revolutions" of the 1930s) would then be the flattery-through-parody of various accent-jokes, the online videos: here Jameson's distinction between modernist satire and postmodern pastiche is instructive. Finally, surely the direct ontologization of the Event is the ossification of cultural studies into a dogma of high-low mash-ups, but also the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, and, perhaps, this present book.

But surely this last is too harsh. Or, too specific, too obsessive. Instead, what is the Event that Žižek's work constitutes is part of the Event of the Internet? In what regard then do the betrayals take place? Disavowal is the reaction of the dinosaurs, the traditionalists in the academy or the culture industry or politics who ignore this revolution. Then, the false imitation of the digital, of the Internet, is its corporatization. Here the corporate is a continuation of fascism—the closing down of the Internet *qua* free space of inquiry and communication via social media interfaces in the developing world, for example, but also the Googlification of everything. And the direct ontologization of the Internet *qua* Event is thus the various exploitations of its capacities for a "false socialism" of "information wants to be free"—Napster, with the impoverished musicians of the past decade standing in for the Kulaks in this Stalinism of the digital.

If this is so, what is the subject that would or has emerged in *fidelity* to the Event of the Internet, if not the Tahrir Square activist, the hacktivist, the "sexting" politician, or the digital artist, to take Badiou's four realms or discourses (politics, science, love, and art) in order. That Žižek believes in the radical potentiality of the Event can be seen in two ways, one positive and the other negative. The first is his references, via Badiou, to the Event of falling in love[23] and the second, the notion of diseventalization, an undoing or turning back the clocks. In part, he has said in various interviews since Occupy and the Arab Spring, this *rückgänig machen* or *Ungeshehenmachen* can be avoided by focusing not on the euphoria[24] of the Event, not the rush in Tahrir Square or the excitement of a General Assembly, but rather "the

morning after," when the excitement dies down and the boring, banal work of organizing garbage pickup and daycare schedules must be dealt with.[25]

By diseventalization, then, Žižek means the undoing of an Event as a way of denying historical or social progress. Arguably, his great—but horrible—examples of this include the 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing*, in which members of death squads from the anti-communist and anti-Chinese violence in 1960s Indonesia reenact their murders some forty years later; the liberal apologia for torture to be found in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*; and even, remarkably, in today's all-too-common public displays of affection that reach pornographic standards. This last he characterizes thus:

> It is often said that today, with our total exposure to the media, culture of public confessions and instruments of digital control, private space is disappearing. One should counter this commonplace with the opposite claim: it is the *public* space proper which is disappearing … Such privatization is an exemplary case of how, in our societies, the emancipatory Event of modernity is gradually undone. (*Event*, 177–178)

There are, then, two or three ways in which to understand such an undoing of the Event: first, formally, in terms of narratives of reversal (such as Martin Amis' novel *Time's Arrow*, or the films *Memento* and *Irreversible*); second, digitally, in terms of such Internet archival projects as the "Way Back Machine" but also media archeology; third, the forms of such an antagonism between the public and private that Žižek seems to bemoan. For this last I want to look at Lena Dunham's memoir *Not That Kind of Girl*.

Is the vagina an Event?

In the introduction to *Event*, Žižek offers, among other "Events," "A papparazo snapped Britney Spears's vagina!" (1). Is Lena Dunham's vagina an Event? She certainly mentions it often enough—thirty-six times—in her 2014 memoir *Not that Kind of Girl*, and it is worth cataloguing those citations (including her reflexive thanks to "Andy Ward, you are the best editor a girl who uses the word 'vagina' a lot could ever ask for").[26]

Describing how she acts more cheerful than she feels while at college, Dunham claims she would "make casual reference to my vagina, like it's a car or a chest of drawers." At the same college, a student-led sex lecture featured "a boy and a girl [who] were recruited to show their penis and vagina, respectively, to an eager crowd of aspiring Dr. Ruth Westheimers."

A friend's roommate, asked to keep her sex noises down, left a note saying, "UR a frigid bitch. Get the sand out of UR vagina." A college boy she avoids refers "to vaginas as 'pink' like it was 1973." Reading in a "puberty book" that an orgasm felt pleasurable like a sneeze, Dunham's eight-year-old self reflects that "a vaginal sneeze seemed embarrassing at best and disgusting at worst." In a list of "18 Unlikely Things I've Said Flirtatiously," Dunham includes "14. 'This one time, I thought I was petting my hairless cat, and it was actually my mom's vagina. Over the covers, of course!'"

At an art opening, when she is five, Dunham tells a stranger, "When I'm bad … my father sticks a fork in my vagina." She adds that her father (painter Carroll Dunham) "makes sexually explicit artwork so he's probably already on the FBI's fork-in-vagina radar." In a long, harrowing passage about what may or may not be sexual assault, Dunham says that a week later "her vagina still hurts." Describing filming herself in sex scenes, she says, "Yes, it's just a job, *but* most people's jobs don't consist of slamming your vagina against the flaccid, nylon-wrapped penis of a guy wearing massive amounts of foundation to conceal his assne." Her period is described as "an itchy sting, like an encounter with bad leaves, in my vagina and ass." In what is eventually diagnosed as endometriosis, Dunham reads Susanna Kaysen's "lyrical little memoir about her struggle with vaginismus, a pain in her vagina she could neither explain nor ignore … At the height of her saga, Kaysen says: 'I wanted my vagina back … I wanted the world to regain the other dimension that only the vagina can perceive. Because the vagina is the organ that looks to the future. The vagina is potential. It's not emptiness, it's possibility.'"

Sitting outside her house when she is seven and her sister, Grace, is one, Dunham's "curiosity got the best of [her]" and she "leaned down between her legs and carefully spread open her vagina" and Lena shrieks—her sister has inserted pebbles into herself. Making out with a girlfriend, "I could feel the tips of her teeth and then my pulse in my vagina." She asks a lesbian friend about cunnilinguism and "whether someone else's vagina was insanely gross." In a list of reasons about why she likes New York, she says that "everyone gets catcalled," by which she means, "If you have a vagina by birth or by choice, you will be called '*mami*' or 'sweetie' or 'Britney Spears.'" And when she returns to her college to give a talk, and has forgotten to pack underwear (and so "spends the weekend going commando in a wool skirt and kneesocks"), Dunham "make[s] sure to keep [her] legs crossed, so as to avoid the headline: 'Returning Alumna Flashes Vagina.'"

Now, there are a number of things that are remarkable about this catalogue—not least that Dunham evidently made a decision to *only* use the word "vagina" (more crude versions like snatch, pussy, or cunt do not make the grade, but, in terms of medical femo-sexual language, womb or labia are

similarly absent; uterus appears). But it is the account of examining her sister's vagina that became a flashpoint, when the right-wing website *The National Review* accused her of sexually abusing her sister (along with accusations of privilege, and, remarkably, of not handling her account of sexual assault by "Barry" properly).

In considering Dunham's memoir and the controversy around it, I want to counter Žižek's argument with respect to the intrusion of private details into the public sphere. I also want to situate Dunham's book, and her work in general, precisely in the digital context with which I am arguing—in my larger project—we can best understand Žižek. The book as ebook, sure, but also as structured in blog-like entries; her online persona via Twitter (exemplary of how celebrities maintain their brand via the semblance of personal contact); her television show (*Girls*, 2012–2017) as part of the contemporary online dissemination or narrowcasting (along with its *semblant, Broad City*, which began as a web series); finally, the way in which these formal and circulation features of Dunham's work function precisely in the way Žižek describes, but exactly opposite. For, really, we have to look at his argument: "It is often said that today, with our total exposure to the media, culture of public confessions and instruments of digital control, private space is disappearing. One should counter this commonplace."

But to better understand the question of the vagina is an Event we should first of all note the startling ways in which the vagina, and other female sexual organs, turn up in Žižek's *oeuvre.* While his riff on the three kinds of toilets and their relation to British, French, and German philosophy is well known, less, perhaps, is his discussion of different ways in which women do or do not shave their pubic hair, distinguishing between "wildly grown, unkempt pubic hair," the yuppie manicured strip, and the punk, entirely shaved (*PF*, 4). Too, in a photograph made by the Slovene IRWIN collective, a younger Žižek lounges with Gustave Courbet's *Origine du Monde*, the famous painting showing a woman's sexual organ spread for the viewer. Finally, there is his correspondence with Nahezhda Tolokonnikova, a member of Pussy Riot. Philosophy, art, and politics: all the bases are covered. And to turn to the question of the Balkan body (which I return to below), again, there are three exemplary cases of women's genitalia being brandished for artistic—but also political—ends. The Croatian artist Vlasta Delimar, in her 1980s collages, frequently displayed images of her vagina, perhaps saying "fuck" or "prick," with crude appliqués of lace and shiny surfaces around the offending organ. Tanja Ostojić made a couple of works with similar brazen effect: *Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport* (2000–2002), featured a large photograph of herself, entirely shaven (part punk, part Holocaust victim); *Black Square on White* (2001), in which her pubic hair

is trimmed into a square, is a comment on Malevich; and Sanja Iveković's "canonical work" *Triangle* depended upon a security officer supposing she was masturbating while the Yugoslav leader Marshal Josip Tito's limousine passed by her apartment balcony. Rather than offering an interpretation of these various interventions, I want instead to present a theory of the vagina, or perhaps another's theory of the young girl.

Theory for teenagers and other browsers

Lena Dunham, it seems, bothers us, not only as a way of disavowing class or being disturbed by child sexuality (and these are inextricably linked, as Žižek argues in "Das Unbehagen in der Sexualität," but also to "feminine hysteria" [*AR*, 196]). Her work bothers us men and us women in the same way the phallus does; in two specific Lacanian ways (as the not-all and as that which hystericizes us) and in a more recent, digital-Žižekian way as exemplified in the Tiqqun collective's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*.

This last text, like Denham's memoir, is a good example of the convolute of private-public that Žižek argues characterizes the undoing of the Event. *Theory of the Young-Girl* has first of all to be understood formally: in its concatenation of different fonts, paragraph formats, and voices, it is Benjamin's *Arcades Project* for the age of Tumblr, a series of statements, declarations, and irritatingly breathless prose such as one encounters surfing the net, flipping through a magazine in the doctor's office, scrolling through Twitter on one's phone during the morning commute (here I preserve the formatting of the book):

The Young-Girl is obsessed with authenticity *because it's a lie*. (23)

The "self" of the Young-Girl is as thick as a magazine. (43)

"Too cool!!" Instead of saying "very" the Young-Girl says "too," while in fact she is so very little. (47)

The Young-Girl is her own jailer, prisoner in a body-made-sign inside of a language made of bodies. (54)

For the Young-Girl, bare life still functions as clothing. (57)

The Young-Girl's love affairs are *work*
and like all work
they have become *precarious*. (69)

From the provinces, from the suburbs, or from rich neighborhoods, insofar as they're Young-Girls, all Young-Girls are equivalent. (82)

"No, my body is not a piece of merchandise. It's a tool for work." (86)

The Young-Girl as living currency. (88)

It appears that all of the concreteness of the world has taken refuge in the ass of the Young-Girl. (91)

The currency of coitus is self-esteem. (95)

The Young-Girl is the elementary biopolitical individuality. (98)

"Ew! You're gross!" (103)

The young-girl is the ultimate slavery through which empire has obtained its slaves' *silence*. (112)

The Young-Girl privatizes everything she apprehends. Thus, a philosopher is not a philosopher to her, but an extravagant erotic object, and likewise, a revolutionary is not a revolutionary but costume jewelry. (114)

The Young-Girl against herself: the Young-Girl as impossibility. (121)

The extreme extent
of male
impotence, of
female frigidity
or rather
of vaginal dryness
can be interpreted
immediately as
contradictions
of capitalism.
(128)

It is only in her suffering that the Young-Girl is lovable. There is, evidently, a subversive power in trauma. (135)

Wherever the commodity is unloved, so is the Young-Girl. (136)[27]

Thus, using the language of Tiqqun, Dunham's ass (her vagina), troubles the impotence (the Event of male impotence) of empire, a biopolitics of self-esteem, a *universalism* of the Young-Girl (see also Roxane Gay: "this essay collection translates far beyond the white, urban demographic of Girls. Some

things, like our humanity, are universal. We all examine our families' bonds and oddities. We all experience the insecurity of becoming an adult and navigating the world in an imperfect, human body"[28]), a privatization of the body or perhaps, following Žižek, a foisting of the private body into public space, the vagina online, a tool for work (and so Dunham describes filming herself) that is both "too cool" *and* (as she inquires of a strangers vagina) "Ew! that's gross," the lie of authenticity in a self as thick as the fall edition of *Vogue* or as thin as the latest iPhone.

There is also something about the problem of childhood sexuality at work here—this problem, like the problem of the Young-Girl, is no doubt why capital seeks to commodify that sexuality (in this regard Dunham and Žižek are a rejoinder to Tiqqun, which cites Stewart Ewan on the role of marketing to adolescents because they consume [and don't yet produce] and to housewives because of their role in reproduction). As Žižek argues in the "Das Unbehagen in der Sexualität" section of *Absolute Recoil*, childhood sexuality is a problem for two reasons: first, as a "weird phenomenon" that illustrates how sexuality, *from the start*, is both political (in the sense that "there is no sexual relationship" also means "there is no political relationship") and cognitive (think of Freud on our "original researches" on sexuality in his *Three Essays*). Then, childhood sexuality is not, it must be added, some "natural" or "original, wild, savage" condition of our "development." Rather, as that antagonism, that weird repetitive action that requires fantasy, partial drives, to supplement it. And so Dunham's vagina, the Young-Girl's vagina (both young-girls, Dunham and her sister Grace), pose a problem for the conservative hegemony (but also for the multicultural feminists, who, weirdly, like antiporn feminists in the 1980s, join forces with the Right), and must be gentrified into "sexual abuse," "child abuse," and "victim's rights."

Denham's *cause célèbre* is a piece of "hysterical theatre" for the age of Twitter:

> Here we encounter hysterical theatre at its purest: the subject is caught up in a masquerade in which what appears to be deadly serious (her imminent death) reveals itself as fraud, and what appears to be an empty gesture reveals itself as deadly serious (the threat of suicide). The panic that seizes the (male) subject confronting this theatre expresses a dread that behind the many masks there is nothing, no ultimate feminine Secret. This is what makes hysteria so unbearable. (*AR*, 160)

The universality of the Young-Girl, then, is the universality of the non-All, the Lacanian logic of the signifier that is also, via Žižek, the logic of the Internet, the Internet as Event. The Young-Girl as vagina (this is what so disturbs the

alliance of Left and Right that criticizes Dunham) is an Event, a traversing of the fantasy. Now, the point of traversing is not to get rid of *jouissance* (i.e., of enjoying our feminism)—this is the mistake of uptight leftism—but instead to take a minimal distance, unhook *jouissance* from its fantasmic frame, to see *jouissance* as an "indivisible remainder" that is neither intrinsically good or bad. As Žižek outlines in *Less than Nothing*, traversing the fantasy as an Event does not so much escaping reality but "vacillating it," accepting the inconsistent non-All (*LtN*, 689). The Young-Girl, the vagina, the Internet is the "inconsistent non-All": the big Other that lacks, the stumbling machinery, the vagina filled with pebbles, the "fragile absolute" *qua* cracked iPhone.

Think back to Lena Dunham's description of, at age seven, looking at her one-year-old sister's vagina. When she sees what is inside it, she shrieks—she glimpses the inanimate objects in her sister's wound, in the void, *this is traversing the fantasy*, fully immersed in what Freud calls her childhood "sexual researches." I would compare this moment in Dunham's childhood to two recent representations of cinematic (or televisual) characters traversing the fantasy with respect to their digital devices. In an episode from the British TV series *Black Mirror*, "Be Right Back" (s02e01), Martha's lover Ash has died but she can access a semblance of him through his stored social media texts and voicemails. When she drops her phone and it breaks, she goes into a panic, until she gets a new device and can contact him again. Similarly, in the 2013 Spike Jonze film *Her*, Joaquin Phoenix's character, Theodore, has an erotic relationship with his operating system (OS); when she has to reboot and is absent for a few hours, he also goes into a panic. These moments of anxiety are akin to what everyone feels when their hard drive crashes, or Wi-Fi is down, or the backup didn't work (a friend's Facebook post: "Back up your computer, back up your phone. Tell your people you love them. Don't wait on anything." *Our phones and computer are more important than our loved ones*). What greater horror for a woman to discover that inside a vagina is not one's body—but pebbles (or, as Dunham's friend is accused of, sand)? It is not that fantasy is a screen that blurs our relation to partial objects, like ill-fitting glasses, or Vaseline on a lens, or an Instagram filter (rather: fantasy is #nofilter). But instead, Žižek argues, we are immersed in reality that is supported by/structured by/enabled by fantasy. But that immersion is disturbed by symptoms, and so, we should identify with the fantasy which structures the excess that resists our immersion in reality.

The *Black Mirror* episode just mentioned also allows us to better understand the Frank Ocean song I mention in the introduction. In the TV show, we first see Ash sitting in his car in the rain, while his girlfriend runs into a store, and he is mindlessly thumbing through his phone, paying more attention, it seems, to his device than to his girlfriend. This turns out to be a blessing in disguise, for it is his very addiction to his phone that enables the production

of a digital simulacra after he dies. Then, in "Facebook Story," the music producer SebastiAn, it will be remembered, could not understand why his girlfriend wanted to be friends on social media. But now we can see a further logic to her desire: she wanted to build up a digital profile of her boyfriend, so when he died (or they broke up), she would still have that simulacra.

Perhaps, then, and as a way of concluding this discussion of the vagina, of the Young-Girl, of this Event, we can offer a provisional Lacanian triad of I/S/R of the vagina. The Imaginary vagina is the vagina as a gentle friend, one's mother's vagina under the bedclothes, that which is masked by pubic hair (keeping in mind Žižek's own breakdown of the three ways in which pubic hair is shaved): this is the vagina as *pussy*.

Remember that in Agatha Christie's Miss Marple mysteries, her detective liked to refer to herself and other women as "old pussies." There is a hilarious scene in *4.50 from Paddington* (in which Marple has already, in an earlier chapter, used the term), when a detective is talking to a character and says of his superior "'He told me never to despise the—' Dermott Craddock paused for a moment to seek for a synonym for 'old pussies'—'—er—elderly ladies'."

The symbolic vagina is the *vagina dentata*, the misogynist's caricature of the feminist vagina, the ballbuster or castrating vagina: this is the *snatch* in the sense that it threatens to snatch the phallus, the Imaginary source of male power.

And the Real vagina is the vagina filled with pebbles or sand, the worldly vagina (but also the birth canal): this is the *cunt*, in the Joycean "dry, sunken cunt of the world" sense.

So if I am arguing that Žižek constitutes an Event in Western thought or theory, in what way does his characterization of the Event of Truth in terms of its radical contingency align with his emergence over the past twenty-five years. Two aspects of this recent history are germane here: first, his "out of joint" relation to the history of communism, or the radical left; second, his massively prodigious output *and* reception. These two conditions are linked, but are both radically contingent. As Santiago Zabala notes, "After all, 1989 was not only the year the Soviet Union dissolved, but also when the Slovenian philosopher's first book in English appeared; in other words, in the year communism ended, Žižek (and many other philosophers) began to endorse it."[29] Thus, Žižek's work began to appear in the very year—1989—that saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crisis of Tiananmen Square[30]—or perhaps "the end of history" was the rebirth of contingency, of the Event—was the Event of the Event. Too, Žižek's production and reception is marked by a high-low disjunction in terms of both content and form, each of which smuggles in the other (a little *Kung-fu Panda* to accompany Lacan, a massive book on Hegel to allow us to disavow our enjoyment of Chinese communist jokes).

Conclusion: The vagina-supposed-to-know

But let's finish with the vagina, or the pussy. Perhaps my taxonomy was a little hasty: perhaps "pussy" as the Imaginary vagina itself needs to be further divided. The Imaginary pussy is the Agatha Christie stereotype of the spinster who, after all, does know, she is the pussy-supposed-to-know, whose name cannot be spoken by the male subject. The symbolic pussy is to be found in the "wuss," where the fear of the castrating female is transposed onto this word for a man who is both a wimp and a pussy, first popularized in the 1984 film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (and there is also a *Seinfeld* episode where Jerry and George trade the term; Jerry looks very upset when he is called a wuss, and his face hardens; this is obviously the worst insult on 1990s network television in the United States). Again, the issue is that which cannot be spoken by the male power. Finally, the Real pussy—perhaps this is Pussy Riot? Both the punks provocateurs in their challenge to Putin's Russia but also, as evinced in the exchange of letters, *Comradely Greetings*, between Žižek and Pussy Riot member Nadya Tolokonnikova when she was in camp PC-14 in Mordovia.[31] In those letters Žižek and Tolokonnikova debated the nature of contemporary capitalism, the colonial perspective of Marxism, and the relation between empirical conditions and theoretical exercises. So, Pussy Riot as a critique of Putin's neo-Stalinism *and* of hedonistic capital with its economic base in the continuing exploitation of labor. What is evident in this Lacanian taxonomy is how it curiously turns out to be both historical *and* antihistorical. The examples—Agatha Christie, US pop culture, and Russian politics—lead us from early twentieth-century mass culture through to its postmodern variants and on to a contemporary post-punk provocateurs. But throughout this series, "pussy" is what the male subjects somehow cannot utter: the male character in *4:50 from Paddington*, the teenagers in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, or New Yorkers in *Seinfeld*, and—what, Žižek himself? Well, even in his exchange with Tolokonnikova, he does write the name of the band, but he reproaches himself for at one point apologizing for being too theoretical and asking Tolokonnikova for the empirical details of her daily existence: "Let me begin by confessing that I felt deeply ashamed after reading your reply. You wrote: 'Don't waste your time worrying about giving in to theoretical fabrications while I supposedly suffer "empirical deprivations".' This simple sentence made me aware of the falsity of the final turn in my last letter."[32]

4

Is the Internet a Thing?

Looking at looking at the Internet

It's a Sunday afternoon, Vancouver winter. The windows are open and a record by Lionel Hampton and Art Tatum plays on the stereo. My son is lying on a loveseat, reading a library book. I sit on the couch, looking at a Vimeo image of Thomas Hirschhorn's video installation "Touching Reality." The clip is two minutes long, punctuated only with what sound like bombs whistling in. The image is of someone else swiping, pinching, enlarging, and reducing images of atrocities. The first image is swiped, then the second stopped; it's of a man in a hospital bed, his genitals visible, blood soaked through various bandages, eyes staring in shock. The fingers of the viewer open up the image to the face, then close it again—this takes ten seconds—and swipe onto the next image, where a man lies on the ground, his skull split open and off-brown brain matter spilling out—swipe to next image, no, come back, open up for details of the brain matter—and so it goes.

How are we to look at these images, and not only these images, but also at the hand that is touching these images (touching reality but Hirschhorn will also insist à la Badiou, Truth, truth as an Event) and then moving on? Hirschhorn gives an eloquent defense of his practice—of the necessity of looking at images of atrocity in today's Internet violence—in *Le Journale de la Triennale* 2 (2012), countering such obscenities as Rumsfeld's observation that death makes war depressing or the Situation Room photo of Obama and his cabinet watching the Navy Seals' assassination of bin Laden.[1] But Hirschhorn does not talk about the framing that activates *Touching Reality*: the very fingers swiping and pinching.

In this chapter, I want to investigate what a cohabitation of Žižekian theory and object-oriented ontology (or OOO) can bring to thinking about the Internet, or digital culture. I take my cue from a number of vertices: the importance of the object or Thing in psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan's *Ding*, Lacan's four objects—voice, breast, shit, and gaze; and his *objet petit a*), the dialogue or at least missed dialogues between Žižek and OOO (in *Less than Nothing,* and in texts by Graham Harman and Levi R. Bryant), and Ian Bogost's specific comments on computers and software. My purpose in the

passage is to highlight the radical, and violent, juxtaposition of the body and the image that Hirschhorn's work makes possible. I will return to the body momentarily, but first want to mention two other cultural objects I work with in this chapter as a way of thinking about the thingness of the Internet: the documentary film *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012, Malik Bendjelloul) and Tao Lin's 2013 novel *Taipei.* In the former, it is the very virtual nature of the folk singer Rodriguez that is so remarkable, offering as it does an analogue for the unlikeliness of a blogcentric philosophical enterprise like speculative realism. Then, in Lin's novel, OOO offers a way of thinking about the objects in the novel, about how Bogost's "democracy of objects," or a flatness of objects, can be realized aesthetically, but also digitally, via the odd irruption of the Internet *into* the novel (and the other way around). But bodies are also objects, and there can be postulated, perhaps, "two bodies of the Internet," or a way of thinking about the Internet as Thing that also pays attention to the bodies that make the Internet, and are in turn made by it. This means, finally, turning to Žižek's body, his Internet body but also his (re)Balkanized body, to think about whether this most immaterial of media is also the site for an anamorphosis of the body.

For Hirschhorn's film is concerned with images of the body and with what the body does with the Internet; it makes the viewer of said images complicit not only in the production of images of atrocity but in their reception—their touching and swiping that is a typical reception and/or interaction with digital technology in the first world. Then, my reception of Hirschhorn's piece in a domestic place, surrounded by the objects—but also children—brings ethical and political questions to the front. What is the effect of seeing such images, and seeing their reception (touching and swiping, pinching and poking), when surrounded by more innocuous objects like vinyl records and my son. But here is a first objection—forgive the pun—am I saying my son is an object? Is this not to *objectify* him? Obviously such a critique goes back to 1970s feminism, when an argument against pornography was made that it objectified women—that it encouraged men to view women as objects, and to treat them as such (to view women as mere vehicles for men's sexual pleasure). But from an OOO perspective, this is as misguided an argument as to call a rapist an animal—it is unfair to objects (or animals). To argue the objectification leads to the dehumanizing or violent or even just disrespectful treatment of women by men necessarily depends on an understanding of the human-object relationship (what Quentin Meillassoux calls "correlationism") as inherently unequal, violent, or instrumental. Now, I am not saying that pornography *does not* encourage its viewers/users to mistreat the persons in the pornography in possibly degrading manners—just that this should not be called "objectification." In part because there are many ways not only that

we relate to objects (this would be a matter of the psychoanalytic discussions I referenced above) but that there are many things and ways in which objects themselves relate to each other.

But if I am objectifying my son in that consideration of the environment in which I looked at *Touching Reality*, if I am considering the biological human being as an object, that may also be what is doing on in the Hirschhorn film. Think of the objects that are involved in the piece: there are bodies, lying in hospital beds or otherwise, with gaping wounds and medical apparatus; there are the cameras or camera phones which made still images from those bodies in situ. There are those images as part of an archive collected by Hirschhorn in his practice of creating the piece. There is the "photostream" that Hirschhorn then created as an iPhone simulacra. There is the digital device, the iPhone or whatever, on which the images were then stored. There are the hands and fingers that then scroll through, touch, swipe, pinch, poke, the images. There is the film made of that process, a film which may have many varieties of outtakes, retakes, shots, and angles. Then there is that film made into a digital video. There is that digital video that is uploaded to the Vimeo website. There are my search terms and search for that video, after reading about it in a Claire Bishop article. Then there is my viewing of that video, on an iPad, in the context described above.

These objects—or Things—or units—then are in various ways part of a system or network called the Internet. But what is the Internet, conceived of in OOO terms? Is it the hardware, the servers and fiber-optic cable, the Wi-Fi towers? Or is the Internet the panoply of consumer and office devices, smartphones and tablets, laptops and desktops, through which human objects connect with and interact with those other objects, and with each other? Or is the Internet the content of those software programs, whether the user-provided content of Web 2.0 systems (Wikipedia, social media, and Flickr) or the images and texts that I store on my laptop as I write this book?

This last list will be familiar to readers of Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*, where he delineates in a more exhaustive fashion the various ways of thinking about the *ET* videogame, arguing finally that the game is all of these things (bytes, packaging, code, and landfill). Bogost argues for a (liberal) democracy of objects—all are equal, but not equally so—to which a Žižekian response might be to call for a communism of objects, a Leninist party of objects, a dictatorship of the objectified. What is the relationship between the different objects or systems of objects in the Hirschhorn example? Bogost, for example, in his discussion of Stephen Shore's photography, makes a connection between the type of camera that

Shore used and his ability to capture the specific objects in, say, a 1970s McDonald's meal. In a similar fashion, Hirschhorn's film makes a radical connection between two different objects or sets of objects: the bodies that have been photographed, and the bodies that manipulate those photographs.

The bodies that have been photographed have first of all been the victims of trauma, of military or terrorist or imperialist violence. Projectiles have ripped into those bodies, whether those projectiles be rifle shells, improvised explosive device (IED) junk, depleted uranium missiles, or other objects that moved at high speeds because of the former (buildings or cars that have themselves exploded). The bodies have been photographed because of today's ubiquity of objects that we call cameras, their presence as image-making machines carried around by many "non-photographers" in their pockets or satchels or other objects. The cameras are then removed from such protective cases, buttons are pushed or swiped, and images are made. From this point on, due to the pervasive technological object we call touch screens, the images are touched. The bodies' images exist in a bewildering variety of objects now: the memory systems of the camera phones (or cameras); the Wi-Fi systems as they are uploaded (or the memory sticks of cameras proper); the laptops and larger computers of media companies or amateur/activist/nongovernmental organization (NGO) photographers (think of how upset we were to learn that Abu Ghraib images were used as screensavers). A communism of objects would assert a political solidarity of the hands that do that touching and swiping—those objects—with the bodies that have been photographed—those objects. And this solidarity exists not only via—or made possible—by the Thing that is the Internet, but also by the object that is the Thomas Hirschhorn artwork *Touching Reality*.

The concept of a "democracy of objects" is argued in Levi Bryant's book of the same name, as well as by Bogost in *Alien Phenomenology* (and perhaps, Bogost suggests, by Latour in his essay where he calls for "an object-oriented democracy"). Bogost makes an explicit connection between flatness and democracy, mistaking, perhaps equality (a flatness where all objects have the same political size, as it were) for the process of democracy (the political struggles for same: which is to say, of necessity communist).

Bryant's argument—where he presents his thesis or manifesto of a "flat ontology" upon which such a democracy of objects rests—is based on four arguments. First, against the self-presence of any entity: a Derridean critique of metaphysics that is also indebted to Lacan's graphs of sexuation (there is no sexual relation means not that men and women do not get along, but that

men or women are not themselves). Not just subjects of lack, but objects of lack: hence Žižek's argument that the gap or split or lack or void in the Real, in the universe, is related to that in the split subject, but in reverse. Then, Bryant claims, there is no (singular) world or universe: "there is no super-object that gathers all other objects together in a single, harmonious unity."[2] Then, the by-now familiar OOO shibboleth that the subject cannot be privileged in any subject-object dyad (and a critique of same, drawing on Harman). Finally, "all entities are on equal ontological footing and that no entity, whether artificial or natural, symbolic or physical, possesses greater ontological dignity than other objects" (246).

This last claim would seem to be related to Meillassoux's discussion of arche-fossils, or the possibility of either thinking of a time before life, or, as Žižek remarks when engaging with Ray Brassier, after life, whether thought can "think the death of thinking" (*LtN*, 953). So, to rehearse Bryant's democracy via Hirschhorn: all entities constitutively split or lacking: this would mean not only the viewing subject and the bodies of the victims, but the systems and units (or assemblages, imbroglios, entanglements) that network such actors: the camera that a person pulls out of his bag or her pocket, the bed or ground that the victims lie on, and the computer networks and signals and passwords: all lack, all are constitutively split. A link may rot, a battery may die, a person may die. All of this has happened. "This having happened is also lacking"—banal. I want to come back to the Lacanian flavor of Bryant's argument as a way of concluding this first section of this chapter. But to continue with Bryant's theses of a flat ontology, is the *sinthome* a Thing, an object? If the *sinthome*, as Lacan writes, is proximate to the unconscious, to the Real, then it would seem to have a relation with the *objet petit a* or *das Ding*. But Lacan and Žižek both are and are not OOO friendly in this regard, and especially with respect to, first, the object/Thing and, secondly, the *sinthome*. First of all, an important shift Lacan introduces is enjoyment brought into the signifier: the *sinthome* is to be sure a signifier, but also entailed in a "splice between his sinthome and this parasitic Real of enjoyment … what I will write: *j'ouis-sens*" (I hear).[3] Žižek riffs on this in *Sublime Object*: "*Symptom as sinthome* is a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment: it is a signifier as a bearer of *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense" (75: which is to say, enjoy-meant). Lacan's *sinthome* (which, he claims, "specifies itself [in relation to the I/S/R] by being symptom and neurotic" *Sem XXIII*, 65)—this is his move away from a language-oriented philosophy. In such a sense it anticipates the OOO shift even as Bryant, for example, must narrate his abandonment of Lacan for speculative realism in terms of both regret and disavowal. In the early 2000s, he writes, Bryant "was at the height of [his] Lacanian period, singing endless

odes to the signifier and fully enmeshed within the linguistic and rhetorical turn," adding that he had "spent more time than [he] care[s] to admit with the Lacanian secondary literature."[4]

I do want to mark, here, another way in which the category of the *sinthome* renders Lacan and Žižek closer to anti-correlationism than might otherwise appear. This is Žižek's critique of historicism, and his call for the recognition of an indestructible kernel of enjoyment in ideology. But how does this enjoyment relate to the Thing or the object? Here, considering the engagement of Harman and Bryant with Žižek, and the latter with Meillassoux and Laruelle/Brassier in *Less than Nothing*, let us look at Bryant's discussion of "Žižek's Objecting Objects" in *Democracy of Objects*. Bryant's argument is that Žižek's conception of the split object is split between its appearance and the "void of its place of inscription within the symbolic order."[5] Or, as Žižek argues in *The Parallax View*, when he is riffing in an introductory way on the plethora of parallaxes, he will consider, "the parallax of ontological difference" signifies "discord between the ontic and the transcendental-ontological (we cannot reduce the ontological horizon to its ontic 'roots,' but neither can we deduce the ontic domain from the ontological horizon; that is to say, transcendental constitution is not creation)" (*PV*, 10).

For Bryant, then, Žižek is mistaken in ascribing a priority (or "hegemonic fallacy," as Bryant calls it) to the "symbolic order," which is to say, to language. But such a connection to language is nowhere in the various passages from Žižek that Bryant cites (more on that practice momentarily): rather, Bryant argues that for Žižek "objects are the *effects* of the symbolic or the signifier" and that in making this argument "Žižek directly follows Lacan, for as Lacan remarks in *Encore*, '[t]he universe is a flower of rhetoric'" (Bryant is enamored of this quote).[6]

Now, the problem here immediately is that in positing Lacan (and Žižek) as such language-centered philosophers, Bryant ignores the fundamental role of enjoyment or *jouissance* in their work, and not only in Lacan's *Encore*, which is precisely about how "Reality is approached with the apparatuses of *jouissance*." For even while Bryant warns the reader that he does not to justice to the complexities of Žižek's ontology—we need to consider how *jouissance* is the "bone in the throat" of the straw man of language-based philosophy, OOO's *sinthome* of correlationism. For Žižek, reality is not so much constituted by split objects as only present in its appearance:

> *the Real itself is nothing but a grimace of reality:* something which is nothing but a distorted perspective on reality, something which only

> shines through such a distortion, since it is "in itself" completely without substance. This Real is a stain in what we perceive "face to face," like the Devil's face appearing amid tornado clouds in the *News of the World* cover photo; the obstacle (the proverbial "bone in the throat") which forever distorts our perception of reality, producing anamorphic stains in it. (*FTKNWTD*, xxvii)

But to flesh out this argument here, I want to look more closely at some of Bryant's objects, or entities, in his use of Žižek in these ten or so pages of *Democracy of Objects*. First of all, he quotes quite thoroughly from Žižek, from *The Parallax View, For They Know Not What They Do, The Sublime Object of Ideology, The Puppet and the Dwarf, Tarrying with the Negative*, as well as from Adrian Johnston's *Žižek's Ontology*, Lacan, and Karen Barad for the concept of entanglement. And while, for Žižek, the Real emerges between the Thing and its void, especially for Bryant this entails the problem of inscription (akin to the crisis of symbolic investiture in Santner); thus for Žižek "identity of an entity with itself equals the coincidence of this entity with the empty place of its 'inscription'" but also, perhaps, identity—what neither Žižek nor Bryant can see—is a surplus, and so we have the problem of the *remainder* of words as things (objects—concrete poetry, the "false trail" or "ruse" of 1970s "materialist signifier") as they move from one object (books, screens) to another. Reality makes up for the constitutive lack of the Thing. If, as Mari Ruti argues, the *objet petit a* is our fantasy of the Thing, so too OOO is the *objet petit a* of its entire apparatus of narrative (the well-known fantasy that conceals a trauma: see the discussion of OOO and speculative realism's founding moments below). Anxiety is not what we feel when confronted with the lack of the object, but with its overwhelming presence, the abyss of the other's desire. So, too, we must ask if the signifier is an object? For Žižek, on the logic of the "re-mark," the signifier lacks itself, even the symbolic is an entity, object, Thing that curves. And so in Žižek's narrative of Einstein (a passage cited by Bryant) standing in as an analysis of the Internet: "With the passage to the general theory [of relativity], the causality is reversed: far from *causing* the curvature of space, matter is its *effect.* In the same way, the Lacanian Real—the Thing—is not so much the inert presence that 'curves' the symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but, rather, the effect of these gaps and inconsistencies." Žižek continues: the Real isn't the literary abyss or horror story; rather, it is what stops us from getting to the Real, the Thing: the bone-in-the-throat (the *Anstoβ*)—or, "what if this very notion that everyday reality is a veil concealing the Horror of the unbearable Thing is false, what if the ultimate veil concealing the Real is the very notion of a horrible Thing behind the veil?"

Bryant therefore reconstructs (or translates—his Latourian metaphor for any interpretation or, indeed, interaction between objects) Žižek's argument with respect to the split object by assembling different passages from Žižek's books, offering his summary and/or critique of same. He begins with Žižek's assertions with respect to the parallax object, making the argument (or arguing that Žižek makes the argument) that the object is distinct from its own place ("the non-identity of the One with itself"). Here, in *For They Know Not What They Do*, however, Žižek introduces two key aspects of his theory that Bryant passes over: "the Real is the 'almost nothing' which sustains the gap that separates the Thing from itself" (xxvii): one, the notion of the Real, and, two, that of the Real versus the Thing. For where Bryant is headed is to the problem of the symbolic, or inscription.

Searching for bananas

Searching for Sugar Man is a film, what appears to be a documentary, about the Mexican-American folksinger Sixto (or Jesus) Rodriguez, who had a brief career in Detroit in the early 1970s before disappearing from public view. But, improbably—*very improbably*—he had a following in South Africa, where his records sold perhaps half a million copies in the ensuing decades. The film shows his South African fans, most of whom seem to be white (but anti-apartheid, we are assured), as they transition from believing Rodriguez is dead (in reality he has been working in construction, running for municipal office, raising children) to discovering that no, he is still alive. The film closes with his triumphant trip to Cape Town in 1998, when he plays sold-out shows around the country.

However, the viewer is never quite certain that this is a real documentary—it feels too much stuffed with the tired tropes of rock documentaries of the kind parodied by *Spinal Tap* years ago: tinkly piano music over transitions, slo-mo wipes of South African sunsets and beaches juxtaposed with snowy Detroit streets, home movies in Kodachrome colors, talking heads who are almost all affably ugly in their everydayness. Indeed, when the South African fans realize their hero is alive, they are themselves not sure to believe the news—as journalist Rian Malan remarks in the film regarding the story arc, "It's so obvious it can't be true. Only an idiot would believe it" (Malan, who has made a career not only of antiapartheid journalism but also debunking AIDS statistics, knows something about *not believing*; indeed, he seems to believe in not believing). Indeed, and equally improbably, one of the main (white) South Africaners of the documentary, record store owner Stephen

Segerman, is called "Sugar" or "Sugarman" after the singer. And it is certainly puzzling that the documentary shows no evidence of the singer having any *black* South African fans (the only black person in the film, besides a South African TV presenter who briefly interviews Rodriguez, is former Motown record executive Clarence Avant, who is suitably unimpressed with the documentarian's quest).

Is the plot of *Searching for Sugar Man* not exactly like how we encounter OOO?[7] Object-oriented ontology (which goes by its OOO moniker and is the better to be cited, debated with, debunked and lauded) and its bastard cousin speculative realism both are based on founding moments, as all fantasies must be: the latter a Goldsmith's symposium in 2007, the former one at Georgia Tech in 2012.[8] Similarly, the 2011 anthology *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* proclaimed that in the first decade of the twenty-first century appeared "the best-organized movement of the next generation," which is to say, realist philosophy, citing such events as the 2006 publication of Quentin Meillassoux's *Après la finitude* (translated in 2008 by Ray Brassier), the 2007 Goldsmith's symposium, and its "follow-up event at Bristol in 2009." Such events and a group were to be, it was claimed, "a key rallying point for the rising generation of graduate students," due in part to "the recent importance of the blogosphere, and the aggressive acquisitions policies of new publishers such as zerO books."[9] And while publishers' promotion is a necessary trope even in the academy, Harman's introduction of his book on Meillassoux similarly rings the bell of generational, if not epochal, change, noting especially "the numerous disciplines in which this young movement has already had an impact: anthropology, archaeology, architecture, English literature, feminism, the fine arts, Medieval studies, musicology, rhetoric and composition, science studies, and others."[10]

Too, Bryant will veer between the affects of conversion narratives (from Lacan to OOO, as it were) and lassitude ("Object-oriented ontologists have grown weary of a debate that has gone on for over two centuries, believe that the possible variations of these positions have exhausted themselves, and want to move on to talking about other things"[11]).

Indeed, at one point in *After Finitude*, Meillassoux seems to lose his nerve, arguing, for example, that "it is essential that a philosophy produce internal mechanisms for regulating its own inferences—and signposts and criticisms through which the newly constituted domain is equipped with a set of constraints that provide internal criteria for distinguishing between licit and illicit claims."[12] Such a formalistic set of "internal mechanisms" resembles nothing so much as the plot or screenplay of a documentary film—that which provides it with coherence, which gentrifies the Real of a lived life and makes it into a narrative that can win audience awards and please

critics. But in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when one carries about an entire library on one's tablet device, the presence of works of OOO and speculative realism as e-books itself gives rise to a suspicion. Are *The Speculative Turn* and *The Democracy of Objects*—both of which are available as free downloads—real books or PDFs put together to look like books, simulacra or *semblants* of an actual text? What kind of objects are they? And if, as Bogost claims, an object can be anything from the code a video game is written in to its failure ("otherwise put, 'E.T.' is Atari's 'Waterloo,'"), then surely an object can be a marketing campaign for OOO itself (witness the breathless prose: "rising generation," and see also an interview with Harman in which he admits to juggling four book contracts, simultaneously).[13]

Part of the allure or mystique of the Rodriguez narrative has to do with a certain "what if?" What if he had made it big in the United States? What if he had known he was famous in South Africa? What if he had been *paid* for his half million in sales (bootlegs, presumably) in South Africa? This last detail is another connection with our current dilemma with respect to OOO. Today's music bootlegs are the various "leaked" MP3s of albums that are freely available online before and after a musician's official release; while wonderful for fans, they are problematic for music critics because of their quality—they may be incomplete tracks, early versions, and so on. While these reservations were passed on to me anecdotally by a music journalist, when I Googled "leaked mp3s" to find a discussion online of same, after a list of tracks one could find of Drake, etc., there was also a notice that certain links had been removed by Google at the behest of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA). But we find the same problem in today's electronic scholarship, and specifically with respect to OOO texts. While on the one hand, as noted above, texts will be available online freely (and legally), bootleg scans and PDFs are also available through various shady sharing sites. (Actually, the order of those events should be reversed: no doubt the proliferation of such gray-area texts has led publishers to release works online.) But how trustworthy is, for instance, my copy of Meillassoux's *After Contingency*, which lacks footnotes and is over 200 pages long, while the book, the "actual," physical book, is less than 150 pages in length?

Thus, there is a matter of temporality: in the case of Rodriguez, the entire premise of the documentary is retroactivity: obviously, one could not make such a film about Bob Dylan or the Rolling Stones (*what if this obscure Upper Mid-Western Jewish singer had sold more than a few hundred records? did you know he was famous in Australia, against all odds?*). Too, unlike the failure of so many other singers to sell very many records, Rodriguez's *failure* only signifies because, it turns out, he had a fanbase spatially removed, and which is now part of a film narrative forty years later. This complex notion

of retroactivity (which also turns out to be spatial, as well as temporal)[14] is important to psychoanalysis, from Freud's use of the term *nachträglichkeit* (in the "Wolf-man" case, but also earlier, in the *Studies in Hysteria* and the *Entwurf*) to Lacan's concept of *après-coup* but especially the *point-de-capiton* in terms of the signification of meaning (in his 1960 lecture "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," in *Écrits).* Too, for Žižek, retroactivity is a key concept, developed with respect to fantasy, but also political action (Lenin); and so in *Less than Nothing*, in a chapter also excerpted in the *Speculative Turn* collection, and repeating some of the ideas of *In Defence of Lost Causes*, he argues that Deleuze insists "how this eternal pure past which fully determines us is itself subjected to retroactive change" and so freedom is "inherently retroactive: at its most elementary, it is not simply a free act which, out of nowhere, starts a new causal link, but a retroactive act of determining which link or sequence of necessities will determine us" (*LtN*, 212–213). Immediately after, discussing Caesar crossing the Rubicon, a fetish point for post-Hegelian historians, Žižek offers what he calls "the most succinct definition of what an authentic *act* is: in our ordinary activity, we effectively just follow the (virtual-fantasmatic) coordinates of our identity, while an act proper involves the paradox of an actual move which (retroactively) changes the very virtual 'transcendental' coordinates of its agent's being" (*LtN*, 214).

Interestingly, in Žižek's example of retroactivity during a European Graduate School lecture/video, an object plays a key role. He describes a stupid or idiotic act, slipping on a banana peel, and when you are in the hospital you fall in love with the doctor, and all of your contingent life is shown to lead up to this point. Indeed, as with his "cat on the precipice" example (of leaders who lose the confidence of the masses), there is a correlationist dialectic at work here in Žižek's cartoon canon: on the one hand, the banana acts (and hence retroacts); on the other hand, the void (under the leader) only exists once the cat or leader becomes aware of it.[15]

Harman engages with Žižek precisely in terms of retroactivity in *Tool-Being*, taking up Žižek on Heidegger in the opening pages of *The Ticklish Subject.* There Žižek reflects on Heidegger's relation to Nazism, arguing that Heidegger's decision to support National Socialism (what he also calls "the right step" albeit in the wrong direction) was a Lacanian "forced choice" in the sense that Heideggerian "thrown projection" means "the future has a primacy: to be able to discern the possibilities opened up by the tradition into which an agent is thrown, one must already acknowledge one's engagement in a project—that is to say, the moment of repetition, as it were, retroactively reveals (and thus fully actualizes) that which it repeats" (*TS*, 14). Then, commenting on Judith Butler (an email, no less!), Žižek argues

that "one can never reach a 'pure' context prior to a decision; every context is 'always-already' retroactively constituted by a decision (as with reasons to do something, which are always at least minimally retroactively posited by the act of decision they ground—only once we decide to believe do reasons to believe become convincing to us, not vice versa)" (*TS*, 16).

Harman uses these comments, and Žižek on the Fichtean *Anstoβ*, as a way to argue that retroactivity is a global ontological condition, not just psychoanalytic (or, rather, that perhaps we can propose a psychoanalysis of objects): "All objects constitute their surroundings retroactivity—objects are *retroviruses*, injecting their own DNA back into the nucleus of everything they encounter."[16] Surely what is striking in Harman's argument here is how he, in orthodox OOO fashion, always comes back to the object—indeed, it functions as the *objet petit a* of OOO—in the same way that the white South Africans come back to the *fantasy* of Rodriguez, as what is "in them more than them," an Imaginary object that reassures them, in postapartheid South Africa, that their struggle was good. In this sense, the role of a resurrected Rodriguez, from the "second death" or symbolic death of a lack of a career (perhaps the Rodriguez phenom is really a way of denying the lack in the Other?) allows dialectics of white guilt to surface. On the one hand, a (living) Mexican-American folksinger (whose music accompanied one's political youth, one's "acting out," one's hysteria) assuages white liberal guilt—which is to say, alleviates such guilt, allows liberals to reassure themselves even as they confront their privilege—*I'm not so bad, yes, Apartheid was bad, but we liked a colored singer!* On the other hand, the guilt remains (it is the *objet petit a* that teaches the white South African what to desire—in this case, to desire Rodriguez) as a narcissistic insistence on one's own agency. I enjoy feeling guilt, remorse, etc., because this reassures me that I am the cause of my environment. This is to say, *I enjoy my guilt*.

So this is an important way in which to view the OOO fascination with the object—not only does the object function as *objet petit a*, but it is this very same narcissistic object—enough about psychoanalysis, the OOO cadre says, let's talk about the object (which is to say, let's talk about *my* object).

But let us return to the question of the banana. As Brian Kim Stefans remarks:

> In Harman's universe, then, not only are bananas objects, but so are aggregate things we create out of bananas (like banana splits), the component things that make up the banana (like the banana's skin and its pulpy interior), imagined things we derive from bananas (like the Bananaman cartoon, or, I guess, Bananarama), as well as the

> corporations behind the cultivation, delivery, and marketing of bananas (like Chiquita Banana).[17]

Stefans brings us full circle, then: the banana peel on which one trips—in Žižek's narrative of retroactivity, here comes, after the fact, to be just another object.

Bananas are not things!

But enough about bananas: (again) what is the Internet, conceived of in OOO terms? Objects themselves that generate anxiety about server farms and electrical consumption, the laying of cable and Wi-Fi radio waves in public schools? Or is the Internet the panoply of consumer and office devices, smartphones and tablets, laptops and desktops, through which human objects connect with and interact with those other objects, and with each other, the digital devices with which we suffer such "passionate attachments"? Or is it the software of all these devices, servers, and Wi-Fi towers, the programs that sort photographs in Facebook servers and run coolant through other servers, that store passwords on our devices and email systems? Finally, but surely not, is the object of the Internet, its Thing, the relationships between different objects, between human objects themselves, but also between human objects and object objects? This is still not to answer the question of what, precisely, our attachment is to the Internet (is it to our devices, or to the networks themselves), and I will return to the question of the objecthood of the Internet in Chapter 7, "The Selfie and the Cloud."

For now, let us remember, as Gijs van Oenen points out, that we are not so much attached to our devices, we throw them away, they are disposable, there is no nostalgia, is there (think of the immense phone Michael Douglas' character gets back when he leaves prison in *Wall Street 2*)?[18] Our attachment is rather to being connected, what Lacan calls the social link, the semblance of connectivity—whether our computers at home or office, our networks on the go, or Wi-Fi when we do not have a dataplan. These impossible objects are both virtual and material, semiotic and the real. They are virtual in the sense that they are pathways through which images, texts, and other data can flow. They are material in the sense that there are routers, and towers, and cable—and antennae in our devices (remember the *frisson* when the iPhone 4 turned out to have a "killer grip" that would "drop calls") but they are also material in the sense that we pay for them—with data plans and cell phone bills, with psychic energy, buying coffees we don't need so we can sit in cafes and check our emails. They are

semiotic—the bars, or Wi-Fi lines, or dots, that signify "penetration" or "completion" or "connectivity"—the Imaginary, say. And they are the Real in the sense that they function as our *objet petit a*, they structure our desire, they are a little piece of the Real. And yet our psychic investments in them are overwhelming.

We can also think of how artists have intervened into these media. In the 1960s, the conceptual artist Robert Barry made works that consisted of radio carrier waves, either treated purely as objects (in the case of CB radio project, "New York to Luxembourg CB Carrier Wave, January 5–31, 1969") or carrying the possibility of being heard on a transistor radio (although only as distorted sounds). This was part of a trend at the time to what Lucy Lippard famously called the "dematerialization" of art, and if it was a nonretinal (transmitters were hidden away, for instance) the waves nonetheless were/are material (and, indeed, Barry was very interested in how they were transmitted, whether they were effected by buildings, line-of-sight, and weather).[19] More recently, for a 2011 exhibition at the Whitney museum in New York, post-Internet artist Cory Arcangel arranged for the museum to "boost cellphone reception and introduce Wi-Fi for computers, whose uses are normally verboten."[20] Arcangel's intervention, then, recognizes that the museumgoer is as likely to be on her phone, texting or taking pictures, as using the sanctioned didactic devices; in one sense, under the guise of making the space more cell phone friendly, it also robs the artistic space of any singularity or state of exception. If Barry's work was enigmatic in its nonvisuality, Arcangel accelerates the digitization of the visual. One uses "waves" to interfere with artistic expectations, the other to facilitate them. And unlike the earlier conceptualists, Arcangel's gesture merely effects a research project for the museum, as, in the intervening years, such institutions will use iPads as teaching devices, or post social media hashtags (selfie in the museum and the like) or even deface the gallery wall with social media-like comments (as Alain de Botton did for the reopening of Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum in 2014).

Today, we clutch our cell phones or place them on café tables like one did packs of cigarettes in the past—others around us who will not stop talking on their cells are as obnoxious as smokers. Consider supermarket tabloids and their photographs of celebrities in mufti: ballcap, sunglasses, child in tow perhaps, but certainly with a Starbucks coffee and—talking on or tapping on their cell. Whereas, again, in the past, only a decade ago, they were snapped smoking. But perhaps it is also an oral fixation, or we can think of the cell or the mobile devices, the tablets or the smartphones, in terms of the Freudian oral/anal/genital triad. Oral: this is what we suck at, what we suck on, the

phone especially is our breast, but whether we are talking on it (or listening—the voice of the mother) or getting information from it (the motherlode, as it were—it is not for nothing that we call it a newsfeed on Facebook, one's Twitter feed), it is very much an oral fixation. Then, the anal: we treat our devices like shit, whether it's the cute little dangly things we attach to phones or the stickers that cover up the Apple logo (these are ways to make them into *our* shit) or in a more excremental way, always replacing them, throwing them away (e-waste), they are very much disposable. Finally, genital: How are our devices phallic? Well, certainly they are signs of our power (especially now that they are getting bigger again) and sexual (now you can fuck your iPad).

But what of our anxiety with respect to digital devices, our passionate attachments? I work out some of this logic in Chapter 6, on the film *Her,* but this anxiety can be situated in two ways that bring together classic Lacanian theory and Žižek's 2015–2016 arguments in the light of the refugee crisis. First of all, for Lacan, anxiety is between desire and *jouissance*: it appears when the border between them is erased.[21] And so there is an *objet petit a* in the device that structures our desire, teaches us what to desire, but this also leads to *jouissance,* to what is called in digital vernacular FOMO, or fear of missing out. Our desire, then, is between $ and *a*, between our barred subject and the *objet petit a.* The latter, Harari argues, is the "subjective correlative of anxiety" (37), but it also has to do with the Other, the big Other, which is to say the Internet, Facebook, surveillance agencies, or even the most banal Other, the café Wi-Fi that keeps frustrating your attempts to log in. Harari then notes that "Lacan would come to say that *the object* a *appears where* (-**φ**) [castration] *is lacking*" (39: italics in Harari), where we have too much of the Other—the over-proximity (which will also become important for the Žižekian "digital neighbor" or "digital refugee" discussed below). But Harari also unites *a* to anxiety, for we also have the formula of drive: $<>D: "the barred subject is articulated to demand," which also relates to technology, conflicts thereof, and the (death) drive of driving (or texting and driving).[22] Demand is articulated, introducing the barred subject but also the question of the lack of the Other, the Other is barred, and hence the dialectic of certainty and deception, of meta-distraction—people distracted by those who are distracted (again, the digital neighbor). These digital pathologies—the subject supposed to text, for instance—arise because, Harari points out, *anxiety supplies certainty* (42). This is to say, our anxiety that others have more of an access to the Other. Certainty is a hinge between anxiety and the two types of action—acting out and the *passage à l'acte*—the first being texting away furiously, the second, perhaps, throwing away one's phone?

Here, if this is not "TMI," and in light of the frequent reference in this book to the cracked iPhone screen as an example of the "fragile absolute" (the lack in the Other), I can offer an anecdote. A year or two ago, I was trying to book an appointment with a therapist through the service provider contracted to my university. I had used the service before, but not within three months, and at a certain point, after I had already told the person on the phone that I was in a crisis, he asked me to provide more information as a precursor to booking the session. At this I threw my phone onto the floor. In a rage, I took the phone outside, and with a sledgehammer, destroyed it, smashing the phone on the concrete skirt that surrounded stairs down to the basement laundry. I was really—in spite of or perhaps due to—my anger, impressed with this action. However, when I told my therapist later that day (calmed down by my partner, I booked a session), she was unimpressed. She knew, even though not a Lacanian, that I was doing it for the Other. This was not the revolutionary act, the *passage à l'acte*, the traversing of the fantasy, but this was merely acting out.

The other way to think about our relation to the digital is in terms of proximity, to the idea, above, that others around us who will not stop talking on their cells are as obnoxious as smokers. This is to think of the Other in the sense of the Neighbor or the Thing—their unbearable proximity. This proximity is surely connected to that social condition of globalized anxiety, to the "double blackmail" that Žižek refers to in his book of the same name. And while Žižek has attracted much attention, and not only on the Left, for his critique of the anodyne sentimentalism with which the West has greeted the latest refugee crisis (since the fall of 2015), I want here merely to connect a more worked-out logic of his to the present thoughts on the digital. The crux of Žižek's argument is that not only the West's much-trumpeted love of or concern for refugees is condescending, but also that it cloaks the necessary material conditions for the reception of the stateless (proper housing, education, medical care, and prospect of jobs and citizenship) in an affective rhetoric that obfuscates the political economy of refugees (from the geopolitical causes of "failed states" and the like to the mafias involved in human smuggling, Turkey's deal with the European Union [EU], how Greece and Italy were left to deal with the human onslaught).[23] But crucial here, and relevant to our paraphrase of Harari on anxiety above, is the way in which Žižek argues, in *Disparities*, that the refugee (but also, arguably, the terrorist as cultural figure) is merely another example of "the traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life (or, rather, way of *jouissance* materialized in its social practices and rituals) disturbs us, throws the balance of our way of life off the rails … this can give rise to an aggressive reaction aimed at getting rid of this disturbing intruder" (180–181). Žižek, drawing

on Éric Laurent and Peter Sloterdijk, then claims that it is the very "alienation of social life" constitutive of life in Western metropolises, the way in which we *must* ignore each other to get on with day-to-day activities, that allows us to tolerate the other. For the refugee and other abject others, the "right to the city" is ultimately the right to be ignored.

Looking at the Internet

I read half of Tao Lin's novel *Tapei* on a flight from Vancouver to Toronto in the fall of 2013. In some ways, this practice is utterly in sync with Lin's novel, which follows the twentysomething writer "Paul" around the United States (and to Taipei) by plane and bus; but in other ways, it is very dissimilar, as I had to read without the Internet. As Lin's contemporary Megan Boyle puts it: "People wrote about looking at the Internet instead of all the cool stuff they did when they weren't at their computers, so it was like there was an automatic empathy starting point because I was just sitting at my computer too."[24]

In *Taipei,* the characters carry around their MacBooks, filming each other, or "looking at the Internet," which is to say that they treat the Internet as a Thing. They ingest incredible amounts of pharmaceuticals and other drugs: Ambien, Xanax, Adderall, Klonopin, Valium, Seroquel (referred to as Suzie Q), oxycodone, Ritalin, Percocet, Flexeril, ketamine, MDMA, and codeine (but also pot, coke, heroin, alcohol, and mushrooms). They sit on mattresses, or yoga mats, in otherwise undescribed (and usually shared) apartments. And they eat pineapple chunks from Whole Foods.

Ambien is the brand name for zolpidem, a prescription drug used for the treatment of insomnia and, according to the zolpidem website, by the US Air Force for pilots requiring sleep on mission preparedness. What is this panoply of objects in Lin's novel—the Internet, the MacBook, prescription drugs, and pineapple chunks? One way to think about the last object, or its relation to other objects like the drugs, is how they counteract, in a certain way, if not each other, then common misperceptions about either healthy diets (fresh fruit) or drug habits. When ingested, pineapple chunks add fiber and fructose to the human body's digestive and alimentary system. Similarly, when ingested, Klonopin, the trade name in the United States for clonazepam, has a sedative and hypnotic effect. But this is perhaps to move too quickly to what these objects do to subjects. For in *Taipei* we also see, incessantly, what people do to and with their drugs. Thus: "Paul moved a rolled-up page of Shawn Olive's poetry book in his right nostril toward the

cocaine and exhaled a little after snorting half his line, causing the rest and some of Daniels to spread in a poof on the table."[25] Or, in a bravura passage: "The next four hours they had sex (and showered) three times, shared 50oz kale-celery-apple-lemon juice and 30mg Aderall, typed accounts of a cold and sunny afternoon one week ago when they walked around SoHo on MDMA shouting iterations of Charles' name (initials, first, first and last, full) at each other while holding hands" (155).

And often, they looked at a MacBook: "After bringing him a glass of water Matt asked if Paul wanted to use his MacBook to look at the Internet" (57). "He opened his MacBook and played 'Annoying Noise of Death' …" (62). "They ate all of it, then arranged themselves on Fran's three-seat sofa and watched *Drugstore Cowboy* on Daniel's MacBook" (65). "Daniel's MacBook, which had files he needed for his job as a research assistant to an elderly ghostwriter (of sports autobiographies) who owed him $200, would require two weeks to be fixed" (69). "Paul woke and rolled onto his side and opened his MacBook sideways" (76). Paul was "working on things on his MacBook" (81). It is rather as if Lin were channeling Latour, who wrote, in his essay "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public," that "[o]bjects become things, that is, when matters of fact give way to their complicated entanglements and become matters of concern."[26]

The American poet Jasper Berne discusses Tao Lin's work in terms of Žižekian overidentification:

> There does seem to be a form of "over-identification" that's really just smokescreen, in which, in order to forestall potential criticism, the person tries to convince you that the trait they are displaying is only worn ironically or self-consciously, in order to ward off any criticism. I feel that that this is the case with, say, the shallowness and self-indulgence of Tao Lin's poetry. And I actually prefer my shallowness without a heaping dose of self-consciousness to help it go down.[27]

In some ways, the flat, "communism of objects" of Tao Lin's fiction resembles the Internet in the sense of regularly shifting units (Bogost): a quote can be copied from a blog, inserted into Twitter, then an essay, with the link "hot"—still steaming from the planet's core that is the Internet.[28] For it is possible to argue, contra Jasper Berne, that overidentification is a radical form of critique (and arguably, contra Latour, a "compositionist" one in the assemblage of objects) in both Žižek and Lin.

Žižek's argument with respect to overidentification has to do with a post-Lacanian theory of the law. I discussed this theory earlier, but let us review. It is a mistake to assume the law functions as a monolithic entity: rather, it

addresses us as split subjects, and there is a concomitant "gap between public discourse and its fantasmic support" ("Re-visioning", 263). This gap is due to a failure in the law—thus superego steps in, with the paradoxical demand that the law depends on its *illegal* enjoyment (*ME*, 54)—the law is incomplete and must be "supplemented by a clandestine 'unwritten' code" (*ME*, 55). Here two points are crucial: on the one hand, we should not underestimate how that fantasmic support—the "castrated Master," as Žižek puts it, is a function of enjoyment for the masses (Žižek calls this the "leader with his pants down" syndrome).[29] Secondly, the notion that social norms (the big Other) depend upon their transgression is illustrated in the Rob Reiner film *A Few Good Men* (1992), where US Marines kill one of their own under an unofficially sanctioned "code red." Similarly, Žižek notes, Bakhtinian carnival maintains the power structure through the function of an obscene release.

If the law functions via its own obscene transgression, then we need another social mechanism (or act, or Thing) with which to critique the law. One method offered by Žižek is overidentification. Since the law is split (into its official form and its unofficial subversion), cynical distance or irony is not only ineffective, but also part of its very functioning (his example is from the movie/TV show *M*A*S*H*, in which the very cynical surgeons are also highly expert doctors; or think of the role that fetishistic disavowal plays in contemporary society as a form of support for neoliberal hegemony all the while fetishizing lifestyle—my example would be bicycle couriers). So Žižek argues that overidentification with the law can be a form of undercutting its efficacy (from *The Good Soldier Schweik* to the Slovenian punk band Laibach).

The blogger "Johannes" (on whose blog Bernes' comment from above appears) discusses this mechanism in the context of the argument that there is no outside of ideology. But the problem is that in a strict Lacanian sense, there *is* an outside to the symbolic: the Real. Or, the Real is "present" when we realize that there is no outside to the symbolic (although, also, the failure of ideology to successfully interpellate us, when we are Althusserian "bad subjects," would be, in Žižek's terms, precisely *when* ideology works). As Matthew Sharpe reminds us, the law functions via its own misrecognitions.[30] This formulation is to be found throughout Žižek's *oeuvre*, and here is a fairly typical iteration:

> In Althusserian terms, the subject is constituted through its assumption of an ideological Call, through recognizing itself in ideological interpellation—this recognition subjectivizes the pre-ideological individual. As is clear to Critchley, this interpellation, the assumption of the call of the Good, ultimately always fails, the subject cannot ever act at the level of this call, its endeavors always fall short. It is here that,

> from the Lacanian perspective, one should supplement the Althusserian account: the subject in a way *is* the failure of subjectivization, the failure of assuming the symbolic mandate, of fully identifying with the ethical Call. To para-phrase Althusser's celebrated formula: an individual is interpellated into subjecthood, this interpellation fails, and *the "subject" is this failure*. This is why the subject is irreducibly divided: divided between its task and the failure to remain faithful to it. It is in this sense that, for Lacan, the subject is *as such* hysterical: hysteria is, at its most elementary, the failure of interpellation, the gnawing worm questioning the identity Imposed on the subject by interpellation —"Why am I that name?" why am I what the big Other claims I am? (*In Defense of Lost Causes*, 344)

For Johannes, Žižek's overidentification is a postmodern ruse, for Sharpe, Žižek misses what is always already a misrecognition in Althusser's account of ideology. With Tao Lin's work, the characters fully inhabit the neoliberal present of online personas, a possession-less nomadism, and what are the most effective drug scenes since Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* or William S. Burrough's *Junky.* This is to say that we are talking about an overidentification with hegemony via its consumer objects. Those things include both commodities and units, and they are the MacBooks sent to Kansas to be repaired, lugged around Baltimore or on a Megabus. Those things are the Megabus, the units of measurement for Adderall or Xanax. But they are also symptomatic of a certain flatness, and how a lack of affect is manifested in the character Paul's flat, "grin of the real." Another object in *Taipei*'s panoply (my word for Latour's imbroglio, Bogost's mess) of things is this grin, which, Cheshire cat-like, floats from one character to another, not signifying an emotion (not a sign) but rather shifting around (an object).[31]

> As they entered a building, a few minutes later, he sort of glanced at Michelle and was surprised to see her grinning, then couldn't stop himself from grinning. Sometimes, during an argument, feeling like he'd been acting in a movie and the scene had ended, Paul would suddenly grin, causing Michelle to grin, and they'd be able to enjoy doing things together again, for one to forty hours, but that hadn't happened this time, partly because Michelle had grinned first. Paul looked away, slightly confused, and suppressed his grin. (*Taipei*, 4)

Tao Lin's characters' pursuit of their objects, an overidentification with same, is how the novel approaches the Real—or how the Real approaches the novel's symbolic universe. Thus, for example, Lin/Paul comes repeatedly, in

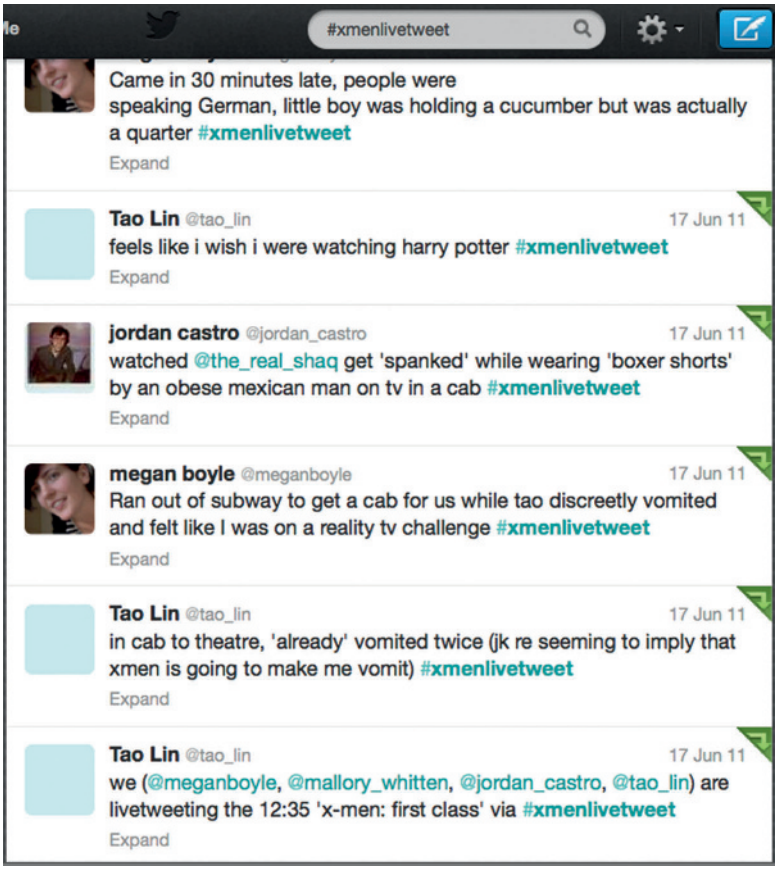
#xmenlivetweet
Came in 30 minutes late, people were speaking German, little boy was holding a cucumber but was actually a quarter #xmenlivetweet
Expand
Tao Lin @tao_lin 17 Jun 11
feels like i wish i were watching harry potter #xmenlivetweet
Expand
jordan castro @jordan_castro 17 Jun 11
watched @the_real_shaq get 'spanked' while wearing 'boxer shorts' by an obese mexican man on tv in a cab #xmenlivetweet
Expand
megan boyle @meganboyle 17 Jun 11
Ran out of subway to get a cab for us while tao discreetly vomited and felt like I was on a reality tv challenge #xmenlivetweet
Expand
Tao Lin @tao_lin 17 Jun 11
in cab to theatre, 'already' vomited twice (jk re seeming to imply that xmen is going to make me vomit) #xmenlivetweet
Expand
Tao Lin @tao_lin 17 Jun 11
we (@meganboyle, @mallory_whitten, @jordan_castro, @tao_lin) are livetweeting the 12:35 'x-men: first class' via #xmenlivetweet
Expand

Figure 4.1 Twitter screengrab.

the novel's closing pages, vomits, as if vomiting up capitalism (from heady mixtures of psilocybin mushrooms, heroin, and lobster pasta). I've mixed up the names of the character and the novelist here because the character, that object, is also "on the Internet": in the novel Paul describes vomiting and then tweeting about vomiting—which tweet is actually on @tao_lin's Twitter feed.

This intense engagement with the objects leaving one's body (the vomit) via the digital (but also the "grin") can be theorized via a discussion by Mari Ruti in her post-Lacanian study *The Singularity of Being*, where she talks about how we "feel compelled to pursue certain paths even when these prove to be intensely self-destructive." and our "jouissance" and "our energies get trapped in painful symptoms." Ruti finishes with a gesture to Paul's vomiting

and grins: "Perhaps the purest expression of this inhuman element is the meaningless facial tic, spasm, or cringe that Lacan hauntingly calls 'the grimace of the real.'"[32]

While I would insist that Ruti's diagnosis is more on point, *Taipei's* or Tao Lin's lack of affect is often read as Asperger-like.[33] In either case, the literary strategy also must be read as a rejection of morality: there is no judgment to aid the viewer in deciding what is bad done by the characters and also lack of affect by characters in describing activities like vomiting, sex, confrontation with parents, and so on. The flatness of tone is then related to an ontological flatness, as when Paul sips "his wine, thinking about how Michael Jackson had been using ten to forty Xanax per night, according to the Internet" (5). The vagueness of "one to forty Xanax" is of a piece with a style that offers no critique of judgment as to what should be included in a novel. Perhaps all that matters is if it can be found on the Internet.

But this question of the object can also, and should also, be discussed in psychoanalytic terms. First of all, the tradition from Freud, Lacan, and Žižek, which begins with Freud's 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. Here, when Freud is discussing memory and judgment, that is to say, ethical activity, he argues that when presented with a *Nebenmensch* (also translated by Strachey as a "fellow human being"—SE **1,** 331) the subject is reminded of "an object *of a similar kind* [that] was the subject's first satisfying object (and also his first hostile object)." Further, Freud remarks, "the complex of a fellow-creature falls into two portions. One of these gives the impression of being a constant structure and remains as a coherent 'thing'; while the other can be *understood* by the activity of memory—that is, can be traced back to information about the subject's body."[34] There is in perception a splitting of the ego, or a *Splatung* of the object into what is already known, and what cannot be known, what will perhaps stay the "Thing," ripping open a hole, as Joan Copjec puts it, in our signifying practice (35). This Thing in the Other, in the neighbor, comes to be quite important to Lacan in *Seminar VII*, where he keeps the word in its German as *das Ding* for a Heideggerian flavor. For Lacan, *das Ding* has two dimensions: it is the unknowable, the terrifying, dumb Real, but it is also an object of desire, connected to *Jouissance*, and some commentators, including Dylan Evans in his dictionary of Lacanian terms, argue that it is the precursor to the *objet petit a*, the object cause of our desire, a concept that will come to have tremendous importance for Lacan in the 1960s (whereas the Thing is only discussed in *Seminar VII*). So the Thing is unknowable, it is a matter of, in Freud's words again, "residues which evade being judged" (SE **I,** 334). It is the Kantian Thing-in-itself. And here we can turn to Žižek's discussions of the Thing and objects in *Less than Nothing*.

Three moments in that book concern us: the brief considerations of Brassier and Laruelle late in the volume, the "interlude" on Meillassoux and anti-correlationism, and the extended section "The Thing itself: Lacan." Discussing Brassier and Laruelle, Žižek comments on the role of the fossil or arche-fossil (bringing to mind the anecdote, recounted by Simon Critchley in his *TLS* review of Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, of AJ Ayer and George Bataille arguing until the early hours, in a Parisian bar, and of the possibility of discussing whether the sun existed before the appearance of humans).[35] Žižek also makes specific comments on the relation of the Lacanian *objet petit a* (and *das Ding*) in the chapter "Objects, objects everywhere" (*LtN*, 649–713), arguing first of all an implicit distinction between the two. If *das Ding* denotes the impossible Real—that which separates, via hystericization, the human from the animal (although we will have occasion to dispute this separation)—the *objet petit a* is more multiple, or multifarious. This *objet* begins as a Badiouan subtraction from reality. Žižek's examples are the brought-together couple in Hollywood movies, or the "scent of a woman" that the hero of the novel/film *Perfume* extracts from his victims. The object is a subtraction from reality because of its impossibility. In both Hirschhorn and Lin, this object might first of all be affect, or emotion: What emotion is possible as we watch another's hand pinch and swipe an image of an atrocity? In our watching we are complicit, so there is no "outside" of the ideology of uncaring voyeurism (and lest we fantasize about the pure subjectivity of those who "cannot afford" smartphones or other technologies, remember the images that circulated in 2013 of children at a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, playing violent video games: victims enjoying their symptom, no doubt!). And more specifically, in *Taipei*, the *objet petit a* as subtraction is surely the specter of the overdose: while the characters evince all manner of overindulgence in drugs, when Paul thinks he has overdosed, his companion tells him you cannot overdose on mushrooms. So even the cliché of drug panics is evaded.

But Žižek continues in this path with the *objet petit a* then as *protraction*, giving as an example the extended shots of Tarkovsky's films. Again, our cultural objects provide a way into the theory. In Hirschhorn's *Touching Reality*, the fingers that pinch and swipe—first of all, we must consider these gestures as forms of what Alexander Galloway has theorized as "micro labor." And then, when the fingers pause, or go back—is not such a pause or rewind (to use Video Cassette Recorder [VCR] terminologies) itself a form of protraction? Or the very indulgence with which Lin focuses on the details of a party or a drug conversation. These species of protraction then add something that is "in the object more than the object."

Žižek's third term for the *objet* is then obstruction: "the *objet a* as an agent of the Cunning of Reason, the obstacle which always perturbs the realization of our goals" (*LtN*, 658). Here we can turn to form, or genre, or medium (but also our old friend flatness). With Hirschhorn, the very medium of the artwork is precisely such a constitutive obstruction: because of the images, and its manipulability, we *cannot touch reality*. For Lin's novel, surely this "Cunning of Reason," or its agent, is the Internet itself. Thus, when we read about Paul vomiting, and then his tweeting of same, and then turn to Twitter to "re-read" that tweet, as in Hirschhorn, we cannot *read* reality. The objects get in the way of the objects.

And indeed these cultural objects may be impeding our move through the theoretical object that is Žižek's argument here. For if the object is excessive, ontology cannot be flat, because object *qua* object is itself both excessive and lacking. The object is what prevents us from reaching the object. For the object is, Žižek argues, constituted first through the big Other, then that which hystericizes the big Other in its inconsistency, which in turn guarantees the big Other, ending with the big Other that is constituted via its own lack. This is to say that "bone-in-throat" is the throat itself.

Or is the Internet a body? The two bodies of the Internet

Digital communications media requires that we think about two bodies, or even two kinds of bodies, following Žižek's elaboration of Kantorowicz's theory of "the king's two bodies."[36] On the one hand, there are two kinds of bodies that work in and with digital media: the bodies that produce the Internet and digital devices (factory workers, miners, social media office workers) and the bodies that, as "prosumers" and other affective-wikinomic subjects, engage with digital media and devices in a manner susceptible to psychoanalytic explanations of the sort I find amenable to Žižekian theory. Too, the Internet's two bodies are also its object-ness, its devices and cables and servers; as well as, again, the libidinal hold it has over us captivated subjects. Of this last dyad, I began to treat it in Chapter 3's discussion of the doubled frame, and returned in the first half of the present chapter, when I discuss objects properly. My material for thinking about these two bodies are, first of all, the discussion one finds in Fuchs and elsewhere on questions of digital labor. But I also want to address in this chapter how these theories of the Internet's two bodies can be applied to Žižek's body on the Internet (thus continuing the discussion in Chapter 2 of Žižek's Internet practice) and, then, thinking of that body in terms of the Balkan body as found in contemporary

art. Against all principles of Žižekian or Hegelian universality, then, I am calling for a Balkanization (or re-Balkanization) of Žižek.

First?! Deal with it

One of the more perverse games that Internet hobbyists like to play is to be the first person to comment after a newspaper article or other comment thread (e.g., *The Guardian* online). The person will then write "first!" or some such before, presumably, moving on to other articles.[37] This is, at first glance, the "empty gesture" *par excellence:* like "Rickrolling" (planting a link in the comments field to a Rick Astley video), however, "firsting" arguably turns comments fields into site for digital reflexivity, a *detournemount* of the purpose of the field (to comment on the article or site) to other ends. Like the more benign trolls (who populate news sites either to argue irritably with others or to promulgate their own views on gun control, etc.) "firsts" resist the wikinomic subjectivization central to digital neoliberalism—which last exists merely to offer the people a place to have the illusion their debate matters. Or that, at least, would be the argument offered by such apologists for the digital revolution as Clay Shirky (in *Cognitive Surplus*) or Don Tapscott (in *Wikinomics*).

But what if, as Žižek argues in *Less than Nothing*, "the task is to leave this void empty, not to fill it up by projecting onto it the disgusting slime called the 'wealth of personality'" (709)? Žižek is talking about a shot in a film, a cinematic frame in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, but I think an argument can be made that such a conception of the void means that we need to rethink what the frame is, what it contains or does not contain. And, we also need to rethink not only this desire to be "first" but also to see that desire as somehow a worthwhile project, for those possessing a "wealth of personality." This is my argument here, and it follows two sets or streams in Žižek: first, that the absence in the frame is constitutive of subjectivity; second, that that subject is indicative of what we might call "the Internet's two bodies."

This frame or void as constitutive of the subject is Lacan 101—or, at least, "Late Žižek" 101, an argument that increasingly is to be found as he grapples with the twin projects of increased Leninization (more direct political engagement and theorizing in his post-9/11 writings) *and* hyper-Hegelization (more and more philosophizing via the massive tomes of *The Ticklish Subject, The Parallax View, In Defence of Lost Causes, Living in the End Times*, and *Less than Nothing*). The emptying out of the subject is both a political symptom and a philosophical problem. Continuing my discussion

of frames in the Event chapter above, I want here to examine that strategy in *Less than Nothing*, then in its origins in earlier Žižek, and then to bring it up to the present, digital arguments.

Back to first

First of all, Žižek connects this "primordial" void, that which is "constitutive of subjectivity," to a "limit to the common-sense idea that our conversation with others should follow the path of straightforward sincerity" (*LtN*, 709), avoiding either empty politeness and rude or unexpected intrusions. For "this *imaginary* middle road has to be supplemented with both its extreme poles: the 'cold' discretion of *symbolic* etiquette which allows us to maintain a distance towards our neighbors, as well as the (exceptional) risk of obscenity which allows us to establish a link with the other in the *Real* of his/her *jouissance*" (*LtN*, 710).[38] But what is not clear is how the void of subjectivity marks a limit to middle-class or middle-road sincerity.

Žižek then gives as another, "more political example of resisting the urge to project" onto the void, the transition from feudal notions of the "King's two bodies" to the revolutionary-popular representations via Jacques-Louis David's 1793 painting *The Death of Marat*. Žižek argues, via T.J. Clark's treatment of the painting (in *Farewell to an Idea*) and Santner's use of Clark (in *The Royal Remains*), that the blank (or black) upper half of David's painting is a similar refusal to "project" a representation of popular power.[39] This refusal, Clark and Santner argue, is both historical and cultural, both a matter of how Marat "could not be made to embody the revolution" because as political figure he was uncertain, indeterminate (and Clark's use of the term "embody," we will see, is significant), *and* a matter of painting, of representation, of a change in "the circumstances of picturing for good."[40]

What is important, for Žižek, about this "refusal to project," is how David's painting signals a Jacobin refusal, at this historical moment, "to treat the Leader as the People incarnated" (*LtN*, 710). But to unpack this we need to go back to an earlier way in which Žižek develops his theory of the "Leader's two bodies," in his 1991 book *For They Know Not What They Do*. There, in the final chapter, Žižek refers to Ernst Kantorowicz's theory of the "King's two bodies," which distinguishes between the king as royal being and his actual, material, body. Drawing on Claude Lefort's critique of Kantorowicz,[41] Žižek argues that what is at stake "is thus not simply the split between the empirical person of the king and his symbolic function. The point is rather that this

symbolic function *redoubles his very body,* introducing a split between the visible, material, transient body and another, sublime body, a body made of a special, immaterial stuff" (*FTKNWTD*, 255). "The King is a thing," as Žižek quotes *Hamlet*, and that "Thing" is, naturally, the *objet petit a.*

A final articulation of Žižekian (and Lacanian) theory is necessary before we can see how these concepts help us to understand present-day digital practices and ideologies. This is Lacan's aphorism *les non-dupes errent*, or "those who are not fooled make a mistake." Lacan utters the phrase at the beginning of *Seminar XXI* in 1973, and remarks immediately that it sounds virtually the same as *les noms du père*, or "the names of the father."[42] Both of these concepts, Lacan tells us, are "the same knowledge. In the two. It is the same knowledge in the sense that the unconscious is a knowledge from which the subject can decipher himself. It is the definition of the subject I am giving here. Of the subject as the unconscious constitutes him. It deciphers him."[43] So, first of all Lacan is pointing to our unconscious forms of knowledge—the Rumsfeldian "unknown known." When you declare that you were not fooled, you are disavowing not only your own unconscious desire to be fooled but the "reality of appearances," the AA logic of "fake it till you make it." As Žižek puts it in *Event*, "the cynic misses the actuality of the appearance itself, however fleeting, fragile and elusive it is, while the true believer believes in appearances, in the magic dimension that 'shines through' an appearance: he sees Goodness in the other where the other himself is not aware of it" (89).[44] This reality of appearances or efficacy of appearances, for example, means that while the cynic (the "ideology critic") will argue that the judge is really just a miserable human being or the priest is a corrupt hypocrite, the believer will realize that nonetheless, the law works through that miserable human being, or because of what the priest *says*, as opposed to what he *means*, people do live charitable or Christian lives.

Žižek often refers to Groucho Marx's line "Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?" and we can surely extend the logic of *les non-dupes errent* to the digital, and, specifically, to social media. By now it has become commonplace to "see through" the triviality and superficiality of social media. Thus, Twitter is just for taking pictures of your lunch—as if Stephen Shore had not demonstrated, in his magnificent color photography of the 1970s, what beautiful pictures can be made of an ordinary, fast-food restaurant, meal. Or, in February 2014, I was asked by a radio station to comment on Facebook's tenth anniversary: Isn't it a problem, the announcer queries, that we always have to pretend to be happy and successful in our status updates? Isn't it all rather cheap and depressing and superficial? *Au contraire,* I pointed out, perhaps the reality of such updates—both of writing or uttering them *and* of reading them is more profound than we otherwise want to acknowledge. If

a child is told, when visiting his grandparents, to act nicely and to be polite, whether or not he respects his grandparents (or, more likely, just wants to be playing soccer or Minecraft with his friends), the *appearance* of having good manners itself results in "a polite, well-behaved boy." Similarly, by avoiding putting our *actual* missteps on Facebook, and waiting to mention a minor victory or good day (in my case, not mentioning the hours I spent hunting down a reference or—indeed!—wasting time on social media, and then just mentioning going for a run), one earns the "likes" (more likes than a white girl talking, as the rapper put it) and odd positive comments that can help you feel better.

The notion of *les non-dupes errent* is related, then, also to the "King's two bodies" developed above. Žižek has argued that the communist fetish of the leader's body—Lenin in the mausoleum, Che's murdered corpse in the South American jungle—is a modern version of the king, where now the leader is the body of the people: the material body itself of the king or leader is not to be so neatly distinguished from the "royal" body. As Thing, as *objet petit a*, the material body turns out to be sublime, to carrying something "in you more than you." From this set of concepts we can now talk about "the Internet's two bodies."[45]

By this idea, to repeat, I mean two sets of bifurcation: both of the Internet and of the body. First of all, the Internet's two bodies are its material, objecthood actuality *and* its virtual, affective, ideological, or psychoanalytic relations and networks (e.g., how we relate to the virtual—lack and loss, fetishism, and perversity). Secondly, those bodies are both the bodies that make and manufacture and retail or service the Internet's material bodies (famously, the workers at Foxconn, the African miners who dig out the rare metals, the Apple store clerks, the "like farmers," and the "feed scrubbers") *and* the bodies of "users," those of us carrying around phones and tablets, at our laptops in cafes or offices or on trains or in lecture halls.

Those bodies overlap—and yet they do not. They overlap in the sense that we must resist any Western exoticization or pathologization of developing world workers, some or many of whom will have access to digital devices, be it for mobile banking in sub-Saharan Africa, downloading MP3s in Lagos, or reporting on a fisher's catch in Cambodia. And yet this is not to deny the tremendous gaps, in all kinds of material ways, from everyday health and sustenance levels to conditions of violence, education, and political equality, not to mention the digital divide, that still fracture the worlds' populations. I want to work this logic out in two fashions here: first, bringing together *les non-dupes errent* and "the Internet's two bodies" to argue that it can be a mistake to think that "the real Internet" is its cables and servers and stacks and that we can ignore (not be duped) by its affective or ideological

or psychoanalytic dimensions. "Liking" is being duped, yes, but so too is the Facebook fast, giving up Twitter for Lent (now that I am off social media, I spend all of my time telling people—that I am off social media!).

And, then, following Žižek's line of thought in *Less than Nothing* (but also Boris Groys in the *e-flux* essay just referenced), it is incumbent upon us to expand the possibilities of the "two bodies" argument. What of, for example, the activist's two bodies? For example, when it turns out that a social worker or antipoverty activist has misappropriated funds, is not the media reaction predicated on a denial of the activist's *carnal*, and material, body, in favor of a sublime, angelic purity? We are assured by the hysterical, self-denying, martyred activist—but if she has a body, desires, and appetites—this troubles us, she or he must be punished. Or what of the migrant worker's two bodies? As migrant rights activist Gracie Mae Bradley points out in an essay in the Merve collection *Euro Trash*, the refugee's "sublime" body as victim of foreign despots quickly becomes the "excremental" body when he or she tries to reach Europe's shores.[46] Or, finally, the artist's two bodies, the artist's "working body," that which exists in a gallery or performance space (Groys refers to Marina Abramović), and his or her "natural, mortal body."

The Internet's two bodies might be a way of thinking about our body *on* the Internet, our body in cyberspace or social media, our body of fantasies and fetishes, versus our body in "meatspace" (as William Gibson used to call it): here the practice of "doxxing" can be a useful case study or limit test. In doxxing, one exposes a virtual or anonymous avatar's "documented" Real—one publishes his or her address and name and phone number, or, in various troll and related practices, sends pizzas there, threatens, denounces to one's employer or school, and the like. While this is a practice that usually seems to be carried out for antifeminist or right-wing ends (hence during the "gamergate" controversy of 2014, or during the rise of the alt-right movement in the United States during the Trump campaign), it is also used, in turn, *against* trolls.

The practice of doxxing tells us something about how power valences both do and do not carry across the virtual-material divide (and also what the nature of that divide is)—and, in turn, how "the Internet's two bodies" helps us think about the frame, the frame of the Internet (or the two frames!) as Event. In terms of power valences, then, first of all the paradox of doxxing is that, along with trolling and other online slander, what is affirmed here is *the Real of the virtual* or of the fantasy. The logic works in the following way. First, doxxing—the threat of "actual" violence, or death threats, attacks on one's person seems to promise that online disputes can spill over into the material world (hence, one's address is published—although, really, many of us had our addresses published for years in old school phone books, or are still available through 411.com). But the reverse may possibly be true: it is

the online violence that is "worse" than actual bodily harm. For example, victims of sexual assault who have reported their crimes to the police will often say that the ordeal of court trials and other interrogations is actually *worse than the rape or assault itself.* It is not the Real of the violent act, but rather its inscription in the symbolic, that is so (or more, or also) traumatic. Adapting the Las Vegas truism, "what happens on the Internet stays on the Internet"—and we "turn off the Internet" because we cannot deal with the real of our fantasy. Father, can't you see I'm installing an operating system (OS)?

The Internet's two workers

In terms of the bodies that make the Internet, that make our digital devices, that lay the transoceanic cables, and so on, it is important, as always, to think dialectically. We have, for instance, become aware in the past decade of the superexploitation of workers at the Foxconn and other assembly plants in China in particular—suicide nets being installed in the workers' dormitories, for example, as a symptom of the harsh working conditions. And here I want to point to an art project by Alice Creisher, Andreas Siekmann, and composer Christian von Borries at Documenta 12, the opera *Together simultaneously: A feasibility study on the Negation of Work (Auf einmal und gleichzeitig. Eine Machbarkeitsstudie zur Negation von Arbeit*), for which a cell phone is dismantled and its parts' labor extracted and labeled: "decommodified," if you will: "1. Housing: Dongguan Nanxin Ltd., Dongguan 1995, day and night shifts each 12 hours long; 45 minute pause, trade unions prohibited, minimum wage according to foreign standard, 500 workers."[47] Too, Christian Fuchs and Ursula Huws have pointed to two related issues with respect to digital or immaterial labor.

This last term is well known from the *Automatista* tradition most recently to be found in Hardt and Negri or Bifo. Huws points out, in the 2014 *Socialist Register*, that "dematerialised labor, dependent on information and communication technologies to observers in developed economies has sometimes served to obscure the reality that this 'virtual' activity is dependent on a highly material basis of physical infrastructure and manufactured commodities" (86).[48] And Fuchs has made the audacious claim (which I think must be defended) that the affective labor of the "prosumer," the "wikinomic subject," as Smaro Kamboureli calls it[49]—is a modern form of housework (and who here has not stopped washing the dishes or interrupted their childcare so they can answer an email or comment on a Facebook status update?).[50] However, one can argue that the issues of representation and visibility that Huws points to are endemic to labor relations under capitalism, and that we

should be careful not to fall into the Western Left's habit of pathologizing developing world workers (the latter either stealing our jobs or needing our protection).

In terms of representation, I should say that the "solution" to the problem of the superexploitation (whether material exploitation as in Foxconn or the DRC, or affective exploitation as in like farming and feed scrubbing) is *not* (the necessary first step of) making the exploitation visible. This is not a new problem, and the Left or critical art world has long encountered the problem (in Godard, Allan Sekula, and Harun Farocki) of the representation of labor, of workers, of the factory, keeping in mind the conditions change in terms of three formations: artistic genres and practices (realism, modernism, postmodernism); laboring conditions and structures (Fordism, neoliberalism); and political theory (automatista vs. Marxism). John Roberts states the problematic quite succinctly in his essay "The Missing Factory," when he calls not so much for the representation of labor as for the dismantling of its conditions:

> The problem, therefore, for bourgeois culture is not the outright symbolic repression of the factory, or its transformation into a place of equanimity and harmony, for this is to precisely betray the cinema audience (no worker or even non-worker would find either position acceptable), insofar as it would dissolve the conflictual demands of narrative as such. The "solution," rather, is to make productive labor, particularly factory labor, the thing that we see (occasionally), but which is not visible—in the sense Lacan articulates in his discussion of the invisible/visible object in the "Purloined Letter." In other words, the missing factory is not just about conditions of access, but of *making visible what cannot be seen*. In these terms: what is seen is not visible, and what is visible is not seen, allowing what is to be seen, when it is seen, to be seen *without consequence*, without full symbolic assimilation. The factory is certainly seen, glimpsed publicly—because the alternative is outright repression or irenic pacification, discordant with the demands of narrative conflict—but not made consistently visible, that is, not actively represented. The factory then is not waiting to be *represented* at all, (in order to reinstate the worker within the symbolic), but, rather, in a more properly transformative and emancipatory way waiting to be *dismantled*.[51]

Here we must aver that, even if we want to hold fast with a critique of the frenzy of the visible, of representation *qua* unproblematized realism, the task of critique must, I would insist, consist precisely in asking what kind of representations, what possibilities for the nonrepresentations, of digital

labor, take place. Thus, even if Creisher and Siekmann's project outlined above may seem overly literal and one-to-one in how it deals with the extraction of surplus value in the production of a mobile telephone, this is only at the level of a quotation from a larger, immersive, music, performance, and intervention. I will return to the issue of the visible momentarily, but the notion of developing world workers and narratives of violence are also at stake in the debate over the mining of rare minerals in the DRC, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Fuchs has drawn our attention to the truly dreadful levels of slavery, child labor, and the hyper-exploitation of farmers and other African peasants in the decades-long conflict in the region. Thus, a 2002 report for the Pole Institute details the economic, gender violence, abandonment of women and agriculture, and general depravity among coltan miners. But equally compelling is the argument made by Dominic Johnson (one of the authors of the Pole report) that we have to be careful not to reinforce a "narrative in which coltan is declared to be the motor for war crimes in the Congo … once again the African [is] a barbarian, a person who shrinks from nothing and shows his teeth at every opportunity."[52]

And it turns out, indeed, that the question of visibility is part of the issue that digital labor itself seeks to obscure. So it is that in an investigative report in *Wired* magazine, a journalist traveled to the Philippines to interview workers whose job it is to scrub social media feeds of such unpleasant matter as beheadings, pornography, and other #NSFW images. Most compelling, Chen's report details the trauma that these Filipino workers suffer from their work, and from seeing hardcore pornography, harsh screengrabs, and political violence, noting that "[w]ithin 25 minutes, Baybayan [a 'feedscrubber'] has eliminated an impressive variety of dick pics, thong shots, exotic objects inserted into bodies, hateful taunts, and requests for oral sex."[53]

A final way to think about affective labor is the phenomenon of "like-farming," or the hiring of workers to endlessly click on Facebook pages to increase their apparent popularity, which Žižek has also discussed (*AR*, 48n52). Here issues range from the success rate of "like farms" to the question of whether such liking is done by actual people or by bots (whether the latter are Russian financed or not).[54] But this ignores the "actually existing" social media liking, or affective labor, which goes on every day (from liking one another's posts to liking products) and is both affective and a matter of commoditized desire. This is to turn from one of the Internet's bodies—conceived of as the body that labors, whether in a traditional factory or in an affect setting—to the other body, the body that holds the phone, the body that fetishizes it or is hystericized by it, the perverse body, the melancholic body.

For we do keep our digital devices close to our bodies, don't we? Not all of us—and Sadie Plant's research in the first decade of this century made

important inroads into cultural, generational, and user-defined differences between those who, with respect to the cell phone, keep it in their pockets or on the café table, hang it from a lanyard around their neck or keep it buried in a handbag or satchel, and carry it in their hand or just leave it at home.[55] But certainly many of us, now, even as the phone gently gets larger and swells like a symphonic movement, keep them close to our genitals or strapped to our belts, close to our money, to our sex and our desire. And if our position, holding the phone up to the side of our heads, leaning over slightly, is, as Paul Feigelfeld and Jan Wenzel have rather mischievously suggested, rather like that of classic images of the melancholic,[56] this well-nigh Agambenesque *acedia* may have not a little to do with the lack and loss we feel with that device, which deprives us of the immediate social even as it demands a cathexis of the libido in the device itself—if not in the social *qua* social network: telephony, social media, email.

Žižek's two bodies

The "two bodies of the Internet" thus proposes that we have two bodies—a virtual one, and a material one—and the virtual one is the sublime body, the body *qua objet petit a.* To further explore this conundrum, consider Žižek's "two bodies": first, his Balkan body, the body of the Eastern European; second, his virtual body, his "Internet body." Or, rather, these are *both* his Internet bodies. His Balkan body is the body that leaks, that is obscene, that is the subject of parody and comment (on his nose wiping, his accent, his sibilant esses). The Balkan body is that which cannot be incorporated into the European project, that which is suspiciously Eastern; two differently gendered takes on such a body can be seen in the works of Montenegro artist Milija Pavićević and Bosnian artist Šejla Kamerić. In Pavićević's self-portraits (often nude, with his penis obscured, or large stitching across his torso, or a saw blade coming out of his forehead), the body as image is cut by the embodied image. This is so specifically in terms of a *Balkan* (or Montenegrin) body, his official identity card is cut by a traumatic memory. As the critic Svetlana Racanović notes, "[i]n the entire Pavićević oeuvre, photography is an instrument of remembrance, the embodiment of memory, a powerful ally, a conspirator and executor of the effects of his memory."[57] The saw blade—signifier of the artist's childhood memories of his father's carpentry shop, Racanović notes—thus constitutes the Real of his Balkan past, only present in the bureaucratic form of a state identity card.

A differently political representation of the Balkan body can be seen in Šejla Kamerić's 2003 photographic installation *Bosnian Girl,* in which a photograph of Kamerić has superimposed over it a graffito: "No teeth? A

mustache? Smel [*sic*] like shit? Bosnian Girl!" This artwork circulated as postcards, posters, and magazine advertisements, but the origin of the text situates it in the history of inadequate European responses to the "Balkan troubles." It was, according to the artist, "written by an unknown Dutch soldier on a wall of the army barracks in Potocari, Srebrenica, 1994/95. The Royal Netherlands Army troops, as part of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1995, were responsible for protecting the Srebrenica safe area yet failed to save 7,000 Muslim men and boys in this supposedly 'safe haven.'"[58] If the racist graffito indicates continuity between a common soldier and the highest levels of NATO policy, Kamerić's combining the text with her image, as a public artwork, demonstrates the Žižekian principle of critique through "over-identification" with ideology. Rather than distancing herself from the description, Kamerić embodies it, takes it onto her Bosnian/Balkan body.

These two examples of Balkan art (or artists) should not be taken as examples of all or most art from the region; thus, Pavićević's work can be considered alongside the IRWIN and NSK collectives, in its engagement with the body, and, certainly, the wild-man aesthetic of Tomislav Gotovac (see, for discussion of these artists, *In Search of Balkania: A User's Manual*).[59] Similarly, if Kamerić's gendered use of her body can be situated alongside both Marina Abramovič's canon and the more recent political actions of Tanja Ostojić,[60] perhaps it is the more sustained critique of the geopolitical to be found in the practice of Sanja Iveković, whose important 1979 piece, "Triangle," found her performing private actions during a public state visit.[61] Too, the Balkans should not be taken as some absolute other to the West, or, even as authority on its otherness, as the Bjelić and Savić collection *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* demonstrates all too well.[62] And if Marina Gržinić's theorization of a retro avant-garde is a useful way for marking art that developed in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, "a new ism of the East," what still must be determined is the question of continuities and discontinuities with the present-day cultural production and the very rich tradition, for instance, of conceptualism, body art, and performance in Croatia—which I recently witnessed on visiting the Muzej suvremene umjetnosti (Museum of Contemporary Art) in Zagreb.

And the question of Balkan art must also be understood in terms of the history of European responses to the Balkan wars in the 1990s, as argued forcefully by Rastko Močnik and Jelena Vesić. In his 1995 book *Koliko Fašizma?* (*How much fascism?*), Močnik discusses a "purloined revolution," an anti-utopian fascism that, in the breakup of the former socialist Yugoslav federation, resulted in a Debordian "recuperation" of communist yearnings

via nationalist narratives.[63] Following on this argument, Vesić argues that, first, Europe and the Balkans replaced pre-1989 Western and Eastern Europe divisions, with the Balkans increasingly the site of "primitive right-wingers, national populists, and stereotypical blood-thirsty Balkanoid masses."[64]

In referencing contemporary Balkan art, then, and suggesting a continuity between their representations of the Balkan body and Žižek's "Internet body," I am not suggesting an ethnic or racialized or national identity; rather, I am arguing that the "Internet's two bodies" problematizes stable notions of materiality versus virtuality. This is an important theme in recent Žižek writings, where he comes more and more to insist that dialectical materialism today must recognize the "immaterial materiality of the big Other," for example, which matches the immaterial "subject as distinct from the individual qua living being," and even the immaterial status of the Event.[65] So the leaking, materially robust status of Žižek's body is also its immateriality *qua* Internet body. The material is available only via the immaterial, the Event through the virtual, the body through the digital.

One way to demonstrate or test this thesis may be to consider how parody works (or, to collapse Jameson's famous distinction from his postmodernism essay, pastiche). We often parody or pastiche a famous person when we focus on or exaggerate or perform what is excessive in the first place. In old American comedies such as *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, an actress playing the advice columnist Ann Landers would speak with a heavy lisp or slurred esses. Or Chevy Chase, playing US president Gerald Ford, would continually trip. Thus, parody makes available, as a signifying practice, what is excessive in the first place, what stands out or sticks out. It is in some ways a practice of anamorphosis.

To further develop this idea, I want to look at two Internet parodies of Žižek that circulated in the early 2010s: the first, a music video by Slovenian actor Klemen Slakonja called "The Perverted Dance (Cut The Balls),"[66] and the second, a series of four short videos called "Žižek reacts to the Internet."[67] In Slakonja's video, impersonating Žižek, the actor tells one of Žižek's more notorious (rape) jokes (here transcribed from *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*):

> In the good old days of Really Existing Socialism, a joke popular among dissidents was used to illustrate the futility of their protests. In the fifteenth century, when Russia was occupied by Mongols, a peasant and his wife were walking along a dusty country road; a Mongol warrior on a horse stopped at their side and told the peasant he would now proceed to rape his wife; he then added: "But since there is a lot of dust on the ground, you must hold my testicles while I rape your wife, so that they will

> not get dirty!" Once the Mongol had done the deed and ridden away, the peasant started laughing and jumping with joy. His surprised wife asked: "How can you be jumping with joy when I was just brutally raped in your presence?" The farmer answered: "But I got him! His balls are covered with dust!" This sad joke reveals the predicament of the dissidents: they thought they were dealing serious blows to the party nomenklatura, but all they were doing was slightly soiling the nomenklatura's testicles, while the ruling elite carried on raping the people
>
> Is today's critical Left not in a similar position? … Our Thesis 11 should be: in our societies, critical Leftists have hitherto only succeeded in soiling those in power, whereas the real point is to castrate them. (*FTTF*, 6–7)

So the joke is simultaneously offensive (as a rape joke) and highly metaphorical (in the Lacanian and Freudian tradition, castration is a condition of our immersion in the symbolic).[68] Slakonja appears in a grocery store, at a lectern, sitting in a forest with monkeys, in various Žižekian costumes (normcore lecturer, Elvis [aka the Elvis of cultural theory], in a *gi* or karate outfit), in a well-known image from *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Žižek sitting in a motorboat, reenacting a scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds*), in various interruptions of the cinematic or video frame (thus, the actor enters the Mongol scene, dances with the warrior, stops, and asks, "oh my god why am I doing this singing, dancing, I feel like that disgusting guy from Canada, Justin Bieber"), but also, at various times, a large dance scene in the center of Ljubljana in which 100 or so dancers, led by Slakonja, mime pulling down testicles and cutting them off. Slakonja embodies Žižek's Balkan body, from both within (as fellow Slovenian) and without (the sibilant esses, a fake beard). Via the anamorphic perspective of parody, what is excessive about Žižek's body (but also what is excessive about his mélange of erudite and politicized theory with pop culture) is performed, made present, in his Internet body.

The other Internet parody I have already discussed is in terms of *les non-dupes err*, but why not return to it? "Žižek reacts to the Internet" is a series of four short videos (less than two minutes each). In each, the actor, complete with, again, fake beard, sibilant esses, and excessive gestures, sits at a desk and comments on a "viral" Internet video or meme: a cat playing a keyboard, a boy after visiting the dentist, the "deal with it" meme, and a dog jumping onto a balloon. So, the cat video can be thought of in terms of Hitchcock and what is outside the frame, we wonder if the boy has in fact been kidnapped, and the sunglasses in "deal with it" are a form of ideology. In terms of content, the parodies are almost accurate—one could see the cat being discussed in

terms of interpassivity and "the cat supposed to believe," for instance, and the sunglasses surely could be connected to Žižek's well-known riff on the 1980s film *They Live* (John Carpenter), where sunglasses reveal the truth behind ideology.

Problems with the (Re)Balkanization of Žižek

My argument that Žižek's body as it appears in digital media should be contextualized in terms of contemporary Balkan art poses any number of methodological problems, to which I would now like to turn as a way of concluding this chapter. On the one hand, in what way is this argument a matter of special pleading for Žižek's case (can this methodology be a way of understanding other international theorists: Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, or Alain Badiou?); then, is it not a kind of racism to attempt to "fix" Žižek to his region; finally, how are we to reconcile this argument with not only the unfixed global nature of the digital or the Internet but also the Hegelian universality so important to Žižek's thought?

To begin with methodology, with the question of how such a reregionalization can work or fit with other theorists: why not? Here two conditions suggest themselves: the question of whether Žižek is to be taken as a special, or, instead, a typical case; and the relationship between this method and the specifics of the given body of theory. As I argue in Chapter 2, the digital consumption of his work is not unique: other theorists' books circulate as pirated PDFs, and their lectures appear on YouTube (David Harvey and Renata Salecl, for example, have Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce [RSA]-animated whiteboard lectures).[69] But this Internet ability of contemporary theory (say, post-codex theory) suggests all the more relevance of re-situating those theorists in their own bodies and regions. This is not to say that Salecl should be re-Balkanized or that Neil Smith should always be Scottish; rather, that such a gesture is a useful corrective, in my view, to the Internetization of concepts and ideas. Too, we have to ask if or how such a move aligns with or contradicts the given theorist's concepts. Take Gayatri Spivak's concept of "planetarity," for example, which suggests a productive way in which to rethink the globalized Internet (*qua* digital capitalism): "The globe is on our computer."[70]

As to the charges of racism, or that by re-situating Žižek in the Balkans I am reinscribing stereotypes of the ethnic Balkan, of the primitive and the criminal (everyone in Macedonia steals, as an artist once told me), surely that is the point! It is only by engaging head-on with racial and ethnic and national stereotypes that one encounters their charge. The point is not to pussyfoot around such nonsense for fear of offending, but instead to determine how

that nonsense provides a way of understanding the threat contained by the national group.

Finally, it turns out, in my reading, that the Internet is the prime site of (Žižek's version of) Hegelian universality. We can only understand the universal with the contingent, the particular: what Žižek denotes as "concrete universality" (*LtN*, 359–367). Žižek's argument at this juncture is that interpretations, to function as universal, must never attempt to engage with the text "directly, as it is 'in itself,' bypassing, erasing, or abstracting from the engaged position of the interpreter" (*LtN*, 359). This is to say that to understand the profound universality of the Internet, one must *not* posit a pure Internet, a global digital civilization. In this way, we realize that the Internet is the universal—a realization possible only by insisting on the particular, on the concrete situation of Žižek's body, of his Balkan specificity.

5

The Subject Supposed to LOL

I remember inquiring of a colleague, also an English professor, a few years ago—is LOL a matter of interpassivity, or *jouissance*? When we type LOL, is the computer or our phone enjoying in our stead, is it laughing so we do not have to (in the sense, explored below, that Žižek once said the laughtrack for a sitcom laughs for us)? Or, rather, is LOL a matter of some unbearable pleasure, some digital excess? This is the opening conundrum of this chapter—using the Internet slang of LOL as a way of talking about Žižek's theories of interpassivity (and the various "subjects supposed to"—desire, enjoy, believe, know), of thinking about earlier precursors of the unbearable enjoyment of the troll (especially, Fichte). In this way we can juxtapose Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (and its key character—Charles Bronson's "Harmonica") with Robert Pfaller's discussion of the "Frankenburger Würfelspiel," but also a few other cultural examples, such as how the artists Martha Rosler and Chto Delat depict social proximity and the Imaginary, a Hitchcock television episode, and a Caravaggio painting. When Saint Thomas sticks his finger into Christ's wound, is this an example of the Real of the digital? Too, is our exasperation with online life, our smartphones and apps, and our desire to delete not a result of that curious dialectic of, on the one hand, the nanny state (where we are constantly told to watch our calories, to turn off our phones) and its inevitable other, the Red Bull state, or the demand to enjoy to excess?

Contemporary linguistics as obscene superego: Or, the demand to text

LOL is one of a number of abbreviations and acronyms that have been developed in a variety of digital media and environments, from online games ("pwned") to cell phone usage, 1990s user groups, coder, and other subcultural jargon, to the social media of Web 2.0.[1] But, as the Bangladeshi critic Arafat Noman has argued: their use today as signifiers of emotions (or

e-motion) suggests that the cybernetic interface of the digital/web/device is more attractive than "in real life," or IRL. If CRBT means "crying real big tears," then perhaps we have a case of *The Fright of Real Tears Version 2.0.* LOL then is part of a family of like terms: LOL (laughing out loud), ROFL (rolling on the floor laughing), and LMFAO (laughing my fucking ass off), which obviously increase in hyperbole and absurdity. The terms, popular in the early 2010s, work in the following way. First of all, LOL comes about (like OMG) as a way to make it easier and quicker to type an expression. The expression is popular, so one uses it frequently, and now that one is typing a lot—social media, handheld devices, surfing the net, etc.—one wants abbreviations. Then, screens are sometimes small and restricted (the SMS character limit). Thus, a *popular* sign (laugh out loud), which has its own etiology and ideology, is made into a new discourse (the digital acronym—with, again, its own semiotics) which in its new practice (in cell phone texts or status updates) finally acquires a history, an archive. Thus, there are three levels of inquiry: the sign, its acronym, and its practice. Some acronyms derive from other acronyms and not a preexisting sign, arguably (see ROFL and LMFAO), but their practice is not necessarily restricted (thus, LMFAO was taken as the name for a rap dance band in 2006).

Criticism of LOL, textspeak, and LOLspeak has, since the mid-2000s, focused for the most part on either origins and usage—thus, linguists discuss the LOLcat Bible, or origins in gaming culture (Gawne and Vaughan, Dash, Rosen)—or a forbearance of censure for the contemporary value of LOLspeak, like slang generally, as exuberant, creative use of language (Curzan, Carey, and McWhorter). "Texting is quite exciting," John McWhorter tells us in his TED talk, where he also claims that texting is a kind of speech—"fingered speech" because of its speed of composition and response—and, further, that LOL no longer means "laugh out loud" but is instead a grammatical "particle," a word like "eh" or "yo" that is less meaningful than a kind of marker (or performative) of shared communication (Curzan agrees, seeing LOL as an indicator that one is listening, but Carey argues that while LOL has been "grammaticalised," or made into a grammatical marker often void of meaning, it still possesses the laughter effect). What this preliminary material shows us, then, is that with LOL we have a concatenation of affect between speed, participation, and pleasure. LOL is the affect of acceleration, then, but also of the prosumer. And that affect is *jouissance.*

But this speculative genealogy does not mean that we should think the signifier LOL refers to laughing out loud. We do not necessarily laugh out loud when we type those words (a few years ago, Darren Wershler noted the appearance of a keyboard with an LOL key) or, rather, letters. But then, the variations are themselves a kind of concrete LOLOLing—their excess

signifies or is a symptom of an excess of communication, beyond meaning, signifying perhaps affect (or even anxiety: Am I LOLOLing enough?).

But we have to work out the logic slowly here. For if often enough we are not laughing out loud (let alone rolling on the floor laughing—who does that outside of TV sitcoms?) then this is a case of the digital interface—or our use of it, our digital practice—laughing for us: the subject supposed to laugh out loud. The subject supposed to LOL. I thus think about Internet usage here—call it not *lol* or *lalangue*, but *lolangue*? LOL and the abyss of the other's desire: or LOL as *sinthome*. (The signifier penetrated by enjoyment—*enjoymeant*—indeed.) Now, evidently this identification with the *sinthome* can also be used to discuss the trash or the triviality of online chatter—empty speech *par excellence*. If desire is necessarily the desire of the Other, than the Facebook "like" is the "like" of the Other.

And in considering *lolangue* we should discriminate between whether the emoticons and semantemes—but especially the Benjaminian constellation around LOL—if they are a matter of *jouissance* or of interpassivity. Who, for example, is the "subject supposed to LOL?" Robert Pfaller, in *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners*, argues that we often take our pleasures by disavowing our own participation, secure in the fantasy that others believe for us. We can think about it in terms of the *sinthome*, the "signifier penetrated by enjoyment." The digital, and online, discourse is characterized by a proximity—over proximity—of the pleasure, or *jouissance* to other (all) kinds of writing. Due to the "obscene superego" of Web 2.0 (the wikinomics subjectivity of always producing *and* consuming—"prosuming"), one cannot just read, one must always also write (fill out surveys, use one's password); one cannot just write, one must read (all the ads around your email). And surely this *réssentiment* is also present in the dismissals of Žižek's work when disseminated as YouTube video lectures. In part we can see such comments as themselves enabled by an ocularphobia or iconoclasm, where the textualcentric disavows possibilities of learning via the visual, via the image, or the moving image. Žižek as ultimate MOOC.

But to tease out the digital from the visual: Sophie Fiennes has argued that "Žižek's own writings are film-like" and that "in film Žižek finally has found an adequate medium to fully express his thoughts" (quoted in Flisfeder, 17); further, Flisfeder adds that "it is the enjoyment found in his approach—his discussion of popular cinema from Hitchcock and Lunch to *Star Wars, Titanic,* and *Kung-fu Panda*—that makes him such an appealing figure in critical theory."[2] Here three arguments are being made: first, that Žižek's work is essentially filmic; secondly, that this is the best way in which he can make his arguments; thirdly, that such a form also involves pleasure. Thus, Flisfeder draws our attention to how the "dialectical collage"

(112) of Žižek's writing is akin to the montage and jump cuts of avant-garde cinema (and music videos)—this formal reading of Žižek's work then parallels my argument in an earlier chapter (on Žižek as Internet philosopher) that his text works through hyperlink-like successions of examples and arguments. But Fiennes makes a stronger argument: she says that film is the adequate medium, perhaps the medium *ne plus ultra, par excellence*, for Žižek's work to emerge. Or, for his expression: this may be true, but my argument is that the digital collage of his texts and lectures makes them best received via the network, the Internet, the online, and the digital. Then we have the question of pleasure: to be sure, what is both appealing and problematic—simultaneously—about Žižek's work is the issue of pleasure, of how much we enjoy (or hate) the pop culture examples and anti-readings, the jokes, the rape jokes, and the references to Stalin and anti-Semitism, his whiteness, his maleness, his accent and beard and performativity.

Language games: From Wittgenstein to 4chan

So, then, *is* LOL a form of interpassivity? We type LOL not only because of how it is easier than typing out "I was laughing out loud that is so funny," (although we should connect this form of abbreviation, like "whatevs," as a symptom of neoliberal, post-affect pragmatism) but as a digital version of Žižek's concept of "interpassivity." By this Žižek means that rather than online or other entertainment being "interactive," instead it produces emotions for us (or is passive in our stead). His archetypal example is the "canned laughter" of television sitcoms: "The Other—embodied in the television set—is relieving us even of our duty to laugh—is laughing instead of us. So even if, tired from a hard day's stupid work, all evening we did nothing but gaze drowsily into the television screen, we can say afterwards that objectively, through the medium of the other, we had a really good time" (*SO*, 33).

Notions of "interpassivity" can be traced to two sites: Robert Pfaller's development of the concept[3] and Lacan's original working out of transference and the "Subject supposed to know." Lacan began work in this theory of intersubjectivity in *Seminar VII* when he was discussing *Antigone*. There, commenting on the structure of Greek tragedy, he remarked that the Chorus is essentially the subject presumed to have emotions:

> When you go to the theater in the evening, you are preoccupied by the affairs of the day. You shouldn't give yourselves too much credit. Your

> emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you. The greatest chance for the survival of classical tragedy depends on that. … Therefore, you don't have to worry; even if you don't feel anything, the Chorus will feel in your stead.[4]

Žižek first formulated his idea of interpassivity, drawing on Lacan's "subject supposed," in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where we can also locate the genesis of interpassivity in Žižek's critique or elaboration of Marx's commodity fetish. Žižek argues that for Marx, the commodity fetish was a shift from belief in persons (i.e., the charismatic king of precapitalist formations) to belief in things (i.e., the commodity, or the money form) and, further, "*the things (commodities) themselves believe in their place*, instead of the subjects" (*SO*, 31). Then, in chapter 5 of *The Sublime Object* is where we see Žižek first of all open up the category of "The subject presumed to … " or "The subject supposed to … ." He opens the category to three other modalities or registers: the subject supposed to believe, the subject supposed to enjoy, and the subject supposed to desire.

For *the subject supposed to believe*, then, there are two examples that Žižek often returns to: one is the various shortages that would from time to time plague socialist countries: knowing full well that there is no toilet paper shortage, someone will start buying it up nonetheless, and soon enough there is a shortage; but the point for Žižek is not that this is a self-fulfilling prophecy, but rather that one acts according to an other's belief and, furthermore, that that "other" does not have to exist, and it is a phantasm in the mind of the first. Then, *the subject supposed to enjoy* is the supposed existence, in the other, of an insupportable, limitless, terrifying *jouissance*; for Žižek, this presumption is especially the root of racism: the racial or ethnic "Other … is always presumed to have access to some specific enjoyment, and that is what really bothers us" (212). Finally, *the subject supposed to desire* is the subject who always needs to have recourse to another subject to organize his or her desire.

These categories are not absolute, and Žižek argues that "the four subjects presumed to … are not on the same level: the subject presumed to know is their basis, their matrix, and the function of the remaining three is precisely to disguise its troubling paradox" (*SO*, 213); the paradox, or mystery, is that, in the process of transference, "to *produce* new meaning, it is necessary to *presuppose* its existence in the other" (*SO*, 210). In the same way, then, the supposition of the subject presumed to believe or desire or enjoy means that in order to produce new belief (to convert), or new desire, it is necessary to presuppose its existence in the other.

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek opens up the category to the "subject supposed to believe," again drawing on Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, and that this displacement (onto another who believes) "is original and constitutive: there is no immediate, self-present living subjectivity to whom the belief embodied 'in social things' can be attributed, and who is then dispossessed of it … the phenomenon of the 'subject supposed to believe' is thus universal and structurally necessary" (*PF*, 135).

And, further, "[a]ll concrete versions of this 'subject supposed to believe' … are stand-ins for the big Other," for the symbolic order *qua* Big Other (*PF*, 138). But before I explore further this notion of intersubjectivity, of the Lacanian decentered subject, it might be useful to descend to the level of the concrete. Another example that Žižek gives of the "subject supposed to believe" is the child for whose sake parents pretend to believe in Christmas; to see specifically how this shifts to a matter of enjoyment, let's look at the Santa Claus example. We don't believe in Santa Claus but we put up a tree, help the kid hang his stocking the night before, perhaps even use the Homeland Security idea (Santa's making his list!) to police their behavior (although does it ever work?), and buy presents and perhaps have some of them "from Santa." Then, on the fateful day, the child can indulge in excess, rip wrapping paper, and get cranky from too much Christmas cake or other overindulgences, and we are then freed up from our own belief and able to get on with the adult world of making dinner, seeing friends and relatives, etc. For Žižek, there is no limit to the intimate emotions, and we can see in this example how belief quickly segues into enjoyment—a crucial category for Žižek's theories of politics, for there is a catch to this interpassivity as well, for we come to resent the other who believes, or enjoys, too much, and then "aggressivity is provoked in a subject when the other subject, through which the first subject believed or enjoyed, does something which disturbs the functioning of this transference" (*PF*, 146).

Two final (and interrelated) registers of this interpassivity: drawing on the work of Etienne Balibar, Žižek often discusses the phenomena of "neoracism" or "metaracism" or "postmodern racism": this is the stance of the (middle-class) liberal who argues, well, *I* am not a racist, but those "lower others" are, so we should limit immigration, enforce secular laws, or what have you. Too, in the fall of 2005 and immediately after Hurricane Katrina, Žižek published an article in the leftist journal *In These Times*, called "The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape," discussing the fantastic news stories that circulated in early September regarding violence in and around the Superdome where poor (and mostly black) residents of New Orleans had taken refuge. Žižek pointed out the role that class- and race-based fantasies played in such a construction, but also the more controversial or counterintuitive assertion that even "if *all*

the reports on violence and rapes had proven to be factually true, the stories circulating about them would still be 'pathological' and racist."[5]

How does this survey of Žižek's concept of interpassivity help us to think about LOL? What is interesting first of all is the disconnect between interpassivity as a response to the cyber-myth of "interactivity" and the examples that Žižek uses. These last are often from either political theory or the everyday (but also religion: the Tibetan prayer wheel, or Greek mourners); there is nary a "hyperlink" or PayPal button among them. For the former, consider the most banal kind of contemporary art, which affixes itself to the children's video toys Wiii (or its Xbox version Connect), offering an "interactive experience." Now the gallerygoer, we learn, is no longer a passive viewer or consumer of a painting, dumbly gazing at an oil canvas to learn the secrets of Western art. Now, instead, one can move one's arms around in front of an interactive video screen and make the image do the most amazing (which is to say, rudimentary) things: zooming in or panning across the screen. The art is interactive because the gallerygoer must interact with the artwork. As though looking at a Rembrandt was not enough of an interaction.

So how does interpassivity work in more digital examples? I would begin to answer this question by limiting how much we should take on faith the claims of Internet or digital users as to what LOL means to them, or why they type LOL. Certainly there is good reason to agree, provisionally, with the folk etymologies and histories that give the origin of the phrase or abbrev in 1990s gaming culture and the speed required of typing. That speed led, on the one hand, to the archetypal LOLcat spellings such as "teh" for "the" and "pwned" for "owned" and privileged, on the other, precisely the acronyms of LOL (Rosen and McWhorter). However, we should question this Wittgensteinian "language game" in terms of speed. Is this speed to be understood as neoliberal efficacy—at one with older business cultures of typists' words-per-minute counts? Or is that speed a matter of the gamers' excitement, their exuberance, and, dare I say, *jouissance* as, in the middle of a game, they convey a strategy or deadlock to a gaming comrade? In this reading, first of all, one is not laughing out loud, one is not even typing laugh out loud, but instead one is typing LOL as an extreme signifier (which does not refer to a signified)—extreme because it is typed so quickly as to become the abbrev AND as a way not to laugh out loud—because you're too busy to laugh out loud (just as, in Žižek's example, one is too tired to laugh at a TV sitcom). LOL, like the laughtrack, does the laughing for you.

But perhaps I am in too much of a hurry to ignore the claims made by texters and other digerati that they are not, in fact, laughing, that, as McWhorter claims, no one could guffaw that much. Not that we should

agree with the claims, but that we should examine such claims as a form of denial or disavowal. Because, perhaps, laughing when at one's computer or smartphone is, well, uncool. Or, more tellingly, it is an example of an affect one should not admit to enjoying. Or, finally, one may not be enjoying the laughter at all: one may actually be in the throes of that unique blend of pleasure and pain called in the Lacanian tradition, *jouissance*.

Our reaction to the linguists' and English professors' abdication of authority is to locate its cause in the narrative "There is no big Other," on the one hand, and the obscene superego on the other. For "there is no big Other" (not to be confused with TINA, or "there is no alternative") means the knowledge of the Other is supposed, presumed, or even—Imaginary (although the big Other entails the Symbolic order). First of all, this is the figure of the "subject presumed to … "—he is only presumed, he does not actually (know, believe, desire, enjoy). Which absence alone does not prevent the workings of ideology or transference (which are indifferent to the empirical), since it is the *presumption*, the *supposition*, that is the motor (or killer app) of the belief system. But Žižek often argues that the decline of the paternal function on modern life also means the rise of the obscene father (from Oedipus to *Totem and Taboo*), be it totalitarian (or populist) leaders or the sexual harasser: "When the 'pacifying' symbolic authority is suspended, the only way to avoid the debilitating deadlock of desire, its inherent impossibility, is to locate the cause of its impossibility into a despotic figure which stands for the primordial jouisseur—we cannot enjoy because HE amasses all enjoyment."[6]

I want to return to this question of *jouissance*, of the "primordial jouisseur," in the second half of this chapter, for this is surely the structural cause of the obscene superego, and its demand to enjoy. The shift from viewing LOL (and LOLspeak, LOLcats, etc.—which latter should also be viewed via an animal studies perspective: the "invisible bike" meme is not only a subjectification of Žižek's "cat on a precipice" but also no doubt often the result of cats being mistreated) as interpassivity to a form of *jouissance* also can be a useful way in which to critique the numerous apologists for and celebrants of Internet culture, whose poverty of dialectical reasoning is matched only by the Internet haters and apologists.

Once Upon a Time in the West

In Sergio Leone's 1969 film *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Charles Bronson plays a nameless character in pursuit of a gunfighter named Frank (Henry Fonda). Bronson's character is an enigma: even as he kills Frank's men, when asked who he is or why he is doing this, he either gives names of people

that Frank and his gang have killed or plays a harmonica he carries on a string around his neck. The harmonica is like nothing so much as a soother, a comforter, an oral toy. As Žižek remarks, for Bronson's character the harmonica is a *sinthome*, a symptom he identifies with: "[t]he only thing that allows him to preserve some consistency, i.e. that prevent him from 'going nuts,' from falling into an autistic catatonia … the harmonica man has undergone a 'subjective destitution'" (*LA*, 139). But why?

Robert Pfaller discusses the same film and symptom (or *sinthome*) in his book *On the Pleasure Principle*, where he situates a key scene in terms of the delegation of guilt to the other, a delegation achieved via play. Here Pfaller is discussing the paradox of "coerced games," the "guilt of appearances," or "the naïve observer and a sense of guilt."[7] The paradox is how we can come to feel guilty for actions that we have been forced into. Pfaller gives as a historical example the "Frankenburger Würfelspiel," a bloody incident during the Counter-Reformation when Protestant rebels were forced to play dice to decide which of them would be hanged. This same process, it turns out, takes place in Leone's film. Throughout the film, we have, at key points, been offered a close-up of Bronson's face and eyes, with a countershot of a blurred figure approaching. As if it were a memory that cannot be acknowledged. In the last few minutes of the film, Bronson and Fonda face off for the classic Western gunfight. The camera closes in first on Fonda's face, and then on Bronson. Now we see what Bronson has been trying to see, trying to remember. The blurred figure is sharpened: it is Fonda, the character Frank, looking different (younger?), walking forward, smiling. He takes a harmonica out of his pocket. We get a countershot again of Bronson, in the present of the gunfight. As if he were in the past, or as if the younger Frank were in his present moment. The camera zooms in closer, so only Bronson's eyes show; on a sweating face, they are obscene. Shot back to Frank, who says, "Keep your loving brother happy." He shoves the harmonica forward—into the mouth of a young boy. The camera pulls back. There are boots on the boy's shoulders. The camera continues to pull back, and we see that a man is standing on the boy's shoulders, his neck in a noose, attached to a stone arch with a bell (a church bell?). As the boy twitches, he suddenly falls, his brother is hung, the boy lands in a cloud of dust, the harmonica falls from his mouth. Cut to the present, the two men shoot, and now Frank falls. As Bronson's character approaches, Frank asks him, "Who are you?" In answer, Bronson pulls the harmonica from his pocket, breaks the string it was attached to, and shoves it into Frank's mouth.

As Pfaller remarks, Bronson's character's trauma comes from not only witnessing his brother's death, but from his complicity, "from the gangsters' having depicted him as an accomplice through the procedure of an elaborate,

theatrical staging of the murder in the form of an execution" (244). Key for Pfaller is the role of the "naïve observer": Bronson's character "knows that he is not guilty, and his conscience is aware of that—but he is guilty in the eyes of a naïve observer. The violent, coerced theatre has created appearances, and thereby awakened the observing agency that judges this appearance accordingly—and done so in a way that is even more horrendous, more 'sartorial,' than any super-ego." Thus, the coerced game introduces fetishistic disavowal in the form of the subject's knowledge (I know very well I did not murder but brother, but nonetheless I feel guilty). That fetish is then localized in the harmonica. And by sticking the fetish into Frank's mouth, this action, Pfaller argues, "is a christening in which not only the object, the fetish, but also the named carried by Bronson throughout the film, 'Harmonica'—and thereby the guilt—change hands" (245).

Or perhaps the harmonica returns to its sender: remember that Frank first of all put it into the young boy's mouth. What is also telling is how the film—arguably one of the finest of the "spaghetti western" genre—narrates the scene. The viewer, like the characters, has suffered from the enigma of who Bronson's character is, and why he is killing, throughout most of the film (the gunfight and lynching flashback come twenty minutes before the end of a two-hour, forty-five-minute film). So now, like Frank, we reconstruct the enigma, it is answered for us, with a well-nigh Genettean analepsis or narrative distortion. In a few minutes, the narrative moves back and forth, introducing a whiplash effect as viewers learn Harmonica's backstory—which is to say, both his identity and his motivation—just as Frank does.

This treatment (Leone's, Žižek's, and Pfaller's) of symptom, fetish, and fantasy can then help us to think about our relation to the digital, the Internet, and our digital devices. Harmonica identifies with his symptom, his musical instrument: it is his *sinthome*, his signifier penetrated by enjoyment, for it provides him with a consistency. Rather than throwing it away, as a reminder of the horror of his brother's death and his own (misrecognized) guilt in that Event, he retains it. Thus, the harmonica is our Android device, or iPhone, or tablet, or laptop. But especially our small, handheld devices. Sadie Plant has noted, in her remarkable survey of the global use of mobile phones, how in some cultures the phone is carried suspended from the neck, by a string.[8] This is to argue, first of all, that the parallel ways in which we treat and use our mobiles, and Bronson's character uses his harmonica, suggest that the device is our *sinthome*, a signifier (how often we refer to our devices by their brand names, for instance) penetrated by enjoyment, by *jouissance*, by the love-hate or Freudian ambivalence. Then, it is also a fetish, an object that allows us to disavow our complicity in global capital, in neoliberalism, in the supply chain that extends from the DRC to Foxconn to our local Apple

store precariat. Here we have to mark a reversal: while Bronson's character knows very well that he is not guilty; as for us, we know very well that we are. Finally, locating the guilt with Frank, replacing the harmonica in his mouth, Bronson's character traverses the fantasy. How so? And what does it mean to traverse the fantasy of the digital world, of the Internet, of our connectivity?

Hitchcock to Fichte

Žižek often digresses to a Hitchcock film, as in "Fichte's Laughter," when he trips from Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* to *Vertigo* and thence the Yugoslav conflict, Agatha Christie and finally Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well* (132–137). But what Žižek rarely discusses is Hitchcock's *television* work, which offers a necessary supplement to the more glossy, *auteurist* cinema productions. Consider the first episode of season four from *Alfred Hitchcock Presents.* Airing in 1958, *Poison* is based on a story by Roald Dahl and set in "Malaya." Harry Pope (James Donald), is lying in bed, sweating: he believes a poisonous snake is under the covers, about to bite him. His friend "Timber" Woods (Wendell Corey) doesn't believe him—thinks it's "just the DTs." Eventually a doctor is called, who administers a preemptive (but useless) serum; the covers are pulled back (the camera repeatedly panning over the bedclothes as if looking for the snake/phallus)—and: nothing. The doctor leaves. Was Harry hallucinating after all? But no, we see—the characters do not—a snake under the pillow. After more hijinks, Timber lies back on the bed—and is bitten. In revenge for his friend's disbelief, Harry doesn't call the doctor in time. At first glance, a textbook example of Lacan's precept that *les non-dupes err*—and in only twenty-six minutes![9]

But watching the teleplay we are intrigued by Wendell Corey—of course! He played Jimmy Stewart's cop friend in *Rear Window.* That was only four years earlier, and yet now Corey is a lot fleshier—perhaps the drinking jokes were written for his own predilection (the IMDb.com website claims that Corey's career was hurt by his alcoholism). Or maybe the casting was a favor for an old friend, and it is certainly a pleasure to see Corey's nonplussed exasperation again.[10] But is the plot not also a form of revenge on Corey's earlier character? As with *Rear Window*, the "Timber" character is the non-duped, but this time he pays a much more severe price for his disbelief. And belief is what is key here: *les non-dupes err* is also a way of encapsulating Žižek's argument that only the Christian is a true atheist. Corey's characters think they don't have to believe—like the cynical Stalinist or priest—because others do believe ("Jeff" in *Rear Window*, Harry in *Poison*, the masses or congregation). And thence, to return to this chapter's subject, the *non-dupes* here are the nonbelievers in the digital, or in LOLcats and texting.

Wendell Corey's two roles also exemplify a problematic in Fichte's philosophy that Žižek teases out: between idealism and materialism. Engaging with Fichte scholar Peter Preuss, Žižek argues the following:

> Fichte's position is thus not that a passive observer of reality chooses determinism, and an engaged agent idealism: taken as an explanatory theory, idealism does not lead to practical engagement, but to the passive position of being the observer of one's own dream (reality is already constituted by me, I only have to observe it like that, i.e., not as a substantial independent reality, but as a dream) … Accepting all this is not a matter of knowledge: it can only be a matter of *faith.*[11]

This observation vis-à-vis Fichte's thought helps us work back, through Hitchcock, to the question of a "cognitive surplus" as evidenced in LOL. The antagonism of idealism versus materialism (or Spinozist determinism) in Fichte thus reverses the stakes: the idealist is passive, the materialist is active. Then, in Hitchcock's film and television show, we have two different trajectories for the same actor: in the first, *Rear Window*, Corey's character debunks the possibility of a man murdering his wife, diagnosing Jeff as precisely that passive idealist, "the observer of one's own dream." In the second iteration, *Poison*, acting as a materialist (diagnosing his friend's perceptions as hallucinations brought on by alcohol), Corey's character lacks the Fichtean faith (fails to make "Fichte's wager"), and suffers thereby.

But this dichotomy in Hitchcock (or Fichte-cock) also allows us to reassess the neoliberal celebration of the "audience" who is suddenly agential in the age of the Internet and to recalibrate that fantasy via Žižek's interpassivity. Žižek revisits the concept in his essay "Fichte's Laughter" (which, in turn, resurfaces in *Less than Nothing*). He suggests, first of all, that an extreme form of interpassivity can be seen when, taping a TV show for later viewing, one anxiously watches the live show as it tapes, to make sure one's VCR is functioning correctly. Žižek argues that this activity is a form of Hegelian "reversal towards itself"; and here we can update the examples to the digital era.[12] Today, one does not (or usually does not) tape a TV show: one may PVR it, however: "time-shifting" one's viewing habits. Such an activity is a form of interpassivity, and so, too, would be downloading (legally or not) the complete discography of one's favorite band. One does not have to listen to every acoustic track of Bob Marley's, just having them on one's hard drive is enough.

Then, consider the Lacanian roots of interpassivity, the *Sujet supposé de savoir*, also revisited by Žižek in these texts:

> Lacan began with the notion of the analyst as "the subject supposed to know," which arises through transference (the analyst is the one supposed to know the meaning of the patient's symptoms). However, he soon realized that he was dealing with a more general structure of supposition, in which a figure of the Other is not only supposed to know, but can also believe, enjoy, cry, and laugh, or even *not* know for us (from Tibetan prayer mills to canned laughter). This structure of presupposition is not infinite: it is strictly limited, constrained by the four elements of the discourse. S1—the subject supposed to believe; S2—the subject supposed to know; S3—the subject supposed to enjoy; and … what about $? Is it a "subject supposed to be a subject?" What would this mean? What if we read it as standing for the very structure of supposition: it is not only that the subject is supposed to have a quality, to do or undergo something (to know, to enjoy …)—*the subject itself is a supposition,* for the subject is never directly "given," as a positive substantial entity, we never directly encounter it, it is merely a flickering void "supposed" between the two signifiers. (*LtN*, 538; see also "Fichte's Laughter," 129–130)

What is interesting here is how Žižek then works via Lacan's four discourses to delimit the supposed subject, but this discursive delimitation, precisely like Fichte's *Anstoß*, is both constraint and impulse.

Oh ha ha so funny I forgot to laugh: Fichte as troll

Experts on Lacan agree that his work proper on *jouissance* began in Seminar VII, on the "Ethics of Psychoanalysis." While the term appears in earlier seminars, in the 1950s, as Marc de Kesel notes, it is "not a proper concept" but instead one more in line with juridical notions of the French term *jouissance*, or usufruct, referring to the enjoyment of property.[13] But de Kesel finds a precursor to Lacan's use of the term in Seminar VII that is of interest to our present purposes: its relation to laughter: "It is not a coincidence when, in his lesson of March 5, 1958, he focuses explicitly on *jouissance* for the first time in his entire seminar project, his chief point of reference is comedy."[14] In Genet, Gide, and Molière, when the protagonist realizes his object of desire, the latter turns out to be an empty signifier: "The subject's quest for himself is thus concluded only with a fictitious artifact" and, furthermore, "His identity is reduced to an artificial thing of nothing and, in that quality, laughed away." Marc de Kesel continues with the role of laughter, noting that "[o]ne's laughter at this obscene epiphany enables the empty signifier to come to light at the very moment it is again repressed. In so doing, it keeps desire

alive. At the moment one laughs, the disconcerting idea that it is all about an empty signifier—and thus, about nothing—is immediately repressed." De Kesel also discusses Molière's *The Miser*: when the miser's empty chest is stolen, "he cries out 'my chest! my beloved chest!' and the audience laughs because, indeed, for a long time, he had merely been cherishing a chest, an empty cover (… Lacan typifies this cry as 'le cri comique par excellence')."

I thus think about Internet usage here—call it not LOL but *lolangue*? To turn back to the scene of LOL, we can hypothesize first of all the difference in terms of audience relations—in classical theater (be it the catharsis of Aristotle or French theater), laughter is a way for the audience to disavow its similarity to the actor's or character's predicament. But for the gamer or texter who is LOLing, such a fantasy is no longer possible—now that we are all "prosumers," LOL now is not so much about repressing "the disconcerting idea that it is all about an empty signifier," but instead the way in which one's *plus-de-jouissance* is being translated into surplus value.

This debate over the *meaning of laughter* can be further developed by jumping from Lacan (or LOL), but still via Molière, to Fichte, to Fichte's manic laughter (we are told that the "*tarte à la crème*" line below refers to a rhyming game in Molière's *L'école des femmes*):

> They answer me: 'Air and light a priori, just think of it! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! Come on, laugh along with us! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! Air and light a priori: *tarte à la crème,* ha ha ha! Air and light a priori! *Tarte à la crème,* ha ha ha! Air and light a priori! *Tarte à la crème,* ha ha ha!' et cetera ad infinitum.[15]

This is in an article, "Examination of a Review Written in a Plaintive Tone," in which Fichte answers his critics, and, in particular, an anonymous review of his *Foundations of Natural Right*. According to a modern critic, said article is "not a dispassionate inquiry" into the "question of appropriate tone for philosophical debate," but "a highly polemical contribution to an ongoing controversy" which "include[s] violent attacks on some of his (anonymous) critics."[16] Thus it is not too far a stretch to say that Fichte's language and tone owes much to a media discourse not dissimilar to today's blogosphere. So when Fichte attributes this manic laughter to his critics, he feigns uncertainty: "Stunned, I look around me. Where did I lose my way? I thought that I had entered the republic of scholars. Have I fallen into a madhouse instead? Dear fellow citizens of the scholarly republic, first have a good laugh, and when your senses have returned I would like to have a few words with you."[17]

Fichte continues in an Imaginary dialogue with his critics, discussing in particular the conditions under which they were laughing, or, rather, the

question of whether his statements would incite his interlocutors to laughter: "No, don't start to laugh again at once, but tell me what is so strange about this statement," or stop it: "Now you are no longer laughing," soon after which the Other responds: "That's why we had to laugh so hard." Žižek adds, in *Less than Nothing*: "The weird nature of this outburst in part resides in its contrast to the more typical common-sense laughter at the philosopher's strange speculations" (*LtN*, 165). What Fichte's discourse (which, in its giddy temperament, is closer to Kittler's "delirious discourse networks" of 1900 than Fichte's historical context of 1800) does is to take laughter seriously, to listen to the trolls. (Keep in mind that many of Fichte's interlocutors were anonymously published, as was his own early support for the French Revolution.)

With the troll, what we most hate is his laughter. We are sure he is laughing at us, "he doesn't mean it," just says whatever nonsense (hateful, sexist, or racist, or homophobic—totalitarian laugher) just to get a rise out of people—it is juvenile, coded as adolescent male, indeed stained with the dominant or hegemonic subjectivity. But both the troll and the philosopher of a Fichtean temperament are concerned with the Other—with the desire of the Other, and perhaps with the Other's *jouissance*.

John Dalton writes in his essay on Fichte and tone that speech is always concerned with the Other and, further, that the very difficulty of his relation with the other signals the possibility for speech and writing (rather than a "hyperbolic 'impossibility' of communication").[18] But he notes regarding Fichte's tone, that even while in his essay he tries to correct the tone of his anonymous critics (Fichte was the first to indulge in "toneshaming")—Fichte's tone renders his own discourse unstable, he is tone deaf, as it were. So unstable that one might think it the symptom of an impossibility—of the Real, perhaps, in philosophy (which enters via media, the materiality of discourse, in a Kittlerian sense, from journals to blogs).

So what does this mean in terms of our argument with respect to LOL? What the acronym marks is evidently an excess of affect (or, rather, that affect, like tone, is always excessive, in appropriate)—LOL is the Fichtean laugh in the sense that it subjectivizes the "speaking subject," or the "fingerspeaking subject," to adapt John McWhorter. Remember Wershler's witticism about the LOL key—rather like the joke about the idiot who couldn't dial 911 because there was not an 11 key on his phone!

The reversal or dialectical antagonism at work here is super obvious: LOL (or its trollspeak version "lulz") signifies the aggressivity of laughter, its obscenity, the stain or penetrating jouissance with which the Internet is pervaded (or permeated). That *jouissance* is of the body, but it also exceeds the body, as sign or *sinthome*.

Fichte's bone in throat, Fichte's wager, Fichte's choice, Fichte's laughter, give Fichte a chance

These varieties of Fichtean titles in Žižek's writings indicate not only the playfulness in that corpus but also a variety of intertexts: Hegel (bone in throat), Pascal (wager), William Styron (*Sophie's Choice*), John Lennon ("Give peace a chance"). And in some ways the question of interpassivity remains the Fichtean bone-in-throat of this chapter, stopping the reader (or writer) from smoothly swallowing that section of how to understand LOL so as to move on to *jouissance*. The argument, first of all, is that an Internet user or texter types LOL to register extreme hilarity of another's comment or post. Thus, we can consider whether such actions, such typings, are *typical* of Internet users—in two senses: Is the Internet really constituted by such "prosumers" (or is it caught by the 1 percent rule) and, then, is LOL anything more than a fad, a trend from the early 2000s that, like Nigerian email spam and MySpace pages, is only a matter of media studies nostalgia?

In some ways, these questions are connected: but see this diatribe against LOL in the art magazine *Artforum*, in which John Kelsey argues (or vents) that "mostly LOL signals the amputation of laughter from the body and its recoding as the silent, poison-dart-like flight of a postword within a network. The more we abuse it, the more it functions as the postlaughter of wit minus bodies, always somehow aimed at the bad faith of postcommunal connectivity."[19] Kelsey goes on to sprinkle the acronym in his text as if to demonstrate he can abuse memes with the best of them: "whatever faded, vaguely LOL echoes it may be producing in the cybernetic noncontext," excoriating "the next-generation gallerists and bloggers who keep these and other names vaguely viral while at the same time inflicting LOL degrees of insecurity on them," venturing off-topic with "The other LOL message here is that 'network' is both a critical hot topic and a shamelessly with-it way of selling paintings in this economic End of Days," closing with "the LOL thing to do with this feeling being to reblog it as painting." But his overwritten text may usefully signal what is or was dangerous about the most juvenile of lulz: that LOL performs a loss, or even a lack. Too, the connection of LOL's two questions (its interactivity and its permanence) can better be seen depending on two or three criteria: First, many or most people on the Internet produce content, as well as sharing and viewing or commenting on/editing same; then, that this practice (or praxis in a Marxist sense) is a meaningful form of (pop) culture *and* a form of politics; finally, that it is possible and desirable to make money facilitating these activities.

This is the crux of the connection between interpassivity, on the one hand, and our excursions into Žižek and Fichte on the other. To explore this, the

work of Gijs van Oenen is useful. A Dutch sociologist, he has expanded the concept of interpassivity into the political domain, arguing that modern democracy (or "emancipation" in his parlance) is intrinsically interactive (relying on citizen participation) and that post-politics of the neoliberal sort is interpassive (reflecting the burden of emancipation). And as if to bring this thinking rudely into the twenty-first century, he offers this provocative reading of Web 2.0 as social democracy:

> Facebook does produce something I would call an emancipatory strain. Its users feel challenged to compete with the upbeat profiles posted by others. They feel the need to show that they, also, have turned their life into success—that they can achieve, and realize, everything that others already seem to have realized and achieved. Now that social conditions seem to enable everyone to make a success out of their lives, we feel it as an obligation, as a burden, to actually do so. In other words, because now we all can be emancipated, we must be. If not, we feel we would betray ourselves.[20]

This is to say, Internet sociality demands that we click, like, and share, even as we vote, sign petitions, and attend meetings. Van Oenen seeks to historicize the concept of interpassivity, and his argument is as follows: modernity proper is characterized by incessant activity, whether conceived of as Marx's upside-down Hegelianism (so historical *Geist* becomes praxis, all that is solid melts into air) or Habermas' summation of nineteenth-century modernity as "revolution, progress, emancipation, development, crisis."[21] But then, van Oenen argues, the changes typical of postmodernity or late modernity "affect the 'trade-off' between activity and passivity as conceptualized in the notion of interpassivity." The important argument in van Oenen's work, however, is to see political activity and the social (and he engages as well, elsewhere, with Latour with respect to modernity and the social[22]) in terms of interactivity: he argues that we can replace Pfaller's theory of the artwork with institutions, and art gallerygoer with "citizen, user, client, consumer, laborer, or member of a family, as we have quite often developed an interactive relation with the institution or authority that regulates our life in such capacities. A typical example is politics, where one-way, paternalistic relations have given way, in the sixties and seventies, to two-way, interactive patterns of communication and opinion-formation."[23]

Here we must take stock of Žižek's claim with respect to Fichte's "self-positing I" as a way of negotiating the divide or antagonism between the digital and the non-digital (or what Lovink, referring to van Oenen's conception of interpassivity, calls "offline romanticism").[24] Livet's argument, as summarized

by Žižek, is that one can only work around the problem of the "self-positing I" (the Münchausen paradox, as Mme de Stael called it) by grounding "the circular movement of reflexivity in itself … by way of referring to *another* I." This, Žižek admits, has a certain "elegant simplicity," with the added benefit of calling to mind the Lacanian neighbor or Thing. But Žižek's rejoinder is that the solution does not work, for it ignores "the fact that the I's relating to the object, in the strict formal sense of transcendental genesis, precedes the I's relating to another I: the primordial Other, the Neighbor qua Thing, is *not* another subject. The *Anstoß* which awakens (what will have been) the subject out of its pre-subjective state is an Other, but not the Other of (reciprocal) intersubjectivity."[25]

I want to use Žižek's argument here to work through some of the preceding texts and situations: from LOL and Fichte to Hitchcock and interpassivity as late modernity. Žižek's argument suggests that we have to determine whether, first, LOL is an utterance that reduces us to the status of troll—or feeding the troll. Fichte's laughter can be seen as both—is a matter of showing how the troll is caught up in the Hegelian "reversal towards itself" ("Fichte's Laughter," 130–131). Fichte's laughter is reflexive, is interpassivity incarnate: is a matter of LOL. Thus, we have two ways in which Fichte's discourse troubles historicity: both in its resemblance to Kittler's 1900-ish "delirious discourse" and as a species of late modern or postmodern interpassivity in van Oenen's sense. But then the *Anstoß* that is the neighbor or Thing is *not* another user or subject: it is the Other *qua* the digital.

The Internet is real: Caravaggio and the digital

In a Twitter conversation in 2014, I wrote first of all "the Internet is real," and then, asked for proof ("How do you know for sure? I need proof"—@deanneachong), I wrote, "besides talking about materiality of fibre optics & cloud servers, I also discuss Caravaggio's 'The Incredulity of Saint Thomas': in touching Christ's body, finger (digital) encounters the Real."

In the Gospel of John (20:24–29), the incident is recorded that after Christ visits the disciples, after the resurrection, Thomas is not there, and he says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place were the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (20:25). Christ comes back a week later and says to Thomas, "Reach your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side. Be unbelieving no longer, but believe" (20:26), and then Thomas believes. The topic was a common set-piece for medieval and renaissance art, and often, as

with Caravaggio's 1602 painting, shows Thomas' forefinger actually inserted/guided into Christ's side. One does not have to be very interested in historical theological debates over belief and things, or objects, or material, to see in the painting an allegory for the digital Real. This is to say that the digital, the finger, the swiping, or the haptic is fundamentally dialectical: it is *both* that which distances us from the image—from the machine, the exploitation (Foxconn and Hirschhorn), the violence, and the machinics—and that which is our connection, which puts us in touch. This is to say that the Internet promise of community and connectivity both is and is not an illusion, a fantasy, an ideology. It is all of those things and yet "miracles do happen, the real does make itself present."

But let us follow the logic of the touch, of the digital, via Caravaggio's painting, and a very unusual appropriation of it in Dave Hickey's essay on Robert Mapplethorpe. In that essay ("Nothing like the sun: On Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*"), Hickey gives the Caravaggio painting as an art historical antecedent to a photograph by Mapplethorpe of a man inserting his finger into his penis. Hickey's argument (after reassuring us that he first saw Mapplethorpe's pictures on a drug dealer's coffee table) is that the perversity of those photographs keeps them on the periphery of the art world (like, Hickey adds, Shakespeare's sonnets in relation to his plays). And I choose "perversity" on purpose here: for Hickey's position is very much that of the Lacanian pervert, who knows the other's desire (knows how "straight" the art world is). We know Caravaggio was a homosexual, cruised for boys and rough trade, like Pasolini, so he is a good antecedent to Mapplethorpe, the difference is not that great.

But perhaps it is the other way around. In Žižek's discussion of *The Aristocrats*, he says a truly obscene version would be for vaudevillians to give a short lesson on Hegel, called "The Perverts!" (*LtN*, 17). Or consider the American habit for university departments to conduct their job interviews in hotel rooms complete with your prospective boss sitting on the bed next to you (this is at hotels, during major conferences like the MLA or the AHA): What is truly obscene is to go into a hotel room expecting to have some sex and, instead, be subjected to a boring job interview—being asked your course outlines and research projects when you thought you could just engage in some extramarital affair. Or, to return to the digital, consider Judd Apatow's 2013 comedy *This Is Forty.* At one point in the film, Paul Rudd is sitting on the toilet, playing Scrabble on his iPad. His wife flings open the door: how obscene to bring a clean digital screen into the toilet! But she sniffs: there is no excremental smell. He is merely using the "watercloset" as a refuge from the busy-ness of everyday family life. That is more obscene: to invade the toilet with a digital toy. This is to say, these are examples, of what Žižek calls "the

shock of a proper dialectical reversal": and especially the revelation not that the sexual underlies the everyday, but that the sexual (or excremental) itself is a screen that protects us from the Real. *So the sexual readings of Mapplethorpe and Caravaggio protect us from the Real that is the digital.*[26]

Les non-dupes jouissent: Pfaller and the missing link between interpassivity and fetishistic disavowal

This notion of the digital as obscene, or perhaps not obscene enough, brings us back to Robert Pfaller, who is both credited by Žižek as the originator of the concept "interpassivity" and shares, with Žižek, an impressive back catalogue where he elaborates on and develops the idea and its implications. While Pfaller does work out the role of interpassivity in Žižek's own *oeuvre*, it is in his book *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture* that he not only works out a genealogy of fetishistic disavowal via the Lacan fellow-traveler Octavio Mannoni (who originated the phrase *je sais bien … mais quand meme …*), but also, with the help of what Pfaller calls "illusions without owners," or our subscribing to beliefs but supposing their adherence by some (Imaginary) others, establishes a connection, a vanishing mediator, perhaps, between disavowal and interpassivity. Is Saint Thomas, that is, not the one who, instead of not believing enough (until he can stick his finger into our Lord's orifice), believes too much, believes too much in what he touches?

This has to do with the relationship, as well, between knowledge and pleasure. On the one hand, knowledge not only does not prevent us from holding beliefs that we know are stupid: rather, *it enables it. Knowledge is a condition for illusion*, Pfaller declares at one point, quoting Mannoni: "the 'but still' [*quand meme]* exists only because there is an 'I know quite well' [*je sais bien*]" (41). Think of an actor at the theater who must play dead. There is no one in the audience who believes the actor is dead, and yet he or she must still be convincing: as Pfaller points out, if the actor were to suddenly sneeze, the illusion would be shattered (39), *an illusion that no one in the theater believes.* The illusion of the theater works because, on the one hand, its belief is supposed to an Imaginary person *and*, on the other hand, *because we know it is an illusion.*

The role of belief cannot be restricted to the theater. First of all, it is one example of the mechanism of interpassivity, which, as both Žižek and Pfaller outline, entails the Lacanian "subjects supposed to … " know, desire, enjoy, believe. The corrupt Stalinist or priest does not have to believe; he just transfers that belief onto the masses or congregation. Enjoyment is suspect: as various Lacanians and Slovenians have argued (Miller and Dolar), racism is based on the idea that the ethnic other enjoys more than we do, that his

enjoyment (of weird food, of our women, of our jobs or our social benefits) is somehow stealing our *jouissance.* All predicated on our not liking our own enjoyment. Then, the subject supposed to desire is the classic position of the analyst (or the big Other): the hysteric, who does not know her desire (what do I desire, what do I want, what is my desire?), presumes that the analyst does desire, does know his desire. But this is also the most radical of the forms of interpassivity in its practice: unlike the disingenuous supposition of belief or the racist supposition of enjoyment, the supposition of desire is always unstable, turns back onto the subject even as it draws the object into its orbit. This is why, for example, Žižek's two films are *the pervert's* guides: they are guides to cinema or ideology for perverts, for those who *think* they know the desire of the other; his films seek to *hystericize* the viewer, to show how cinema, in particular (which is both their medium and their subject), hystericizes us.

If the subject presumed to desire is also presumed to know his or her desire, this shows how the linchpin of interpassivity is the subject presumed to know: the transferential subject. And this role of knowledge, as Pfaller argues, then is also key. For not only does our knowledge of illusions not stop us from falling under their spell, but it ensures it. Again, we connect this to pleasure, and to the Freudian (but also Spinozist) concept of ambivalence. For both Freud and Spinoza, love is made stronger by its opposite. Pfaller quotes Spinoza from Proposition 44, Book III of *The Ethics:* "Hatred which is completely vanquished by love passes into love: and love is thereupon greater than if hatred had not preceded it" (100). The logic is attributable, perhaps, to Spinoza's "geometric style"[27]—the content of affects do not matter (love, hate, envy, etc.); rather, they accumulate as so much material or form. This formalist affect theory is demonstrable first of all, as Spinoza notes, in that "the proof" of Proposition 44 is similar to that of Proposition 38 (in which he declared that if we start to hate something we loved, the hate will be greater than if we never loved it). But there is also a logic of the "prodigal son" involved here: just as the wayward child is rewarded more than the steady and loyal one, so, Spinoza argues with respect to love coming out of hate, "to this joy which love involves … there is also added a joy arising from this—the striving to remove the sadness hate involves … is strengthened in every respect, and accompanied by the idea of the one he hated, (who is regarded) as a cause (of joy)" (Spinoza, 177).[28]

Spinoza's theory of affects is very close to Freudian ambivalence, to the way in which we "love to hate" various object-choices. And is this ambivalence not paramount in our relationship to the digital devices and Internets we deal with every day? Whose Facebook feed does not, at least once a day, feature someone complaining about Facebook?[29]

To delete or not to delete?

Questions of memory, repression, and disavowal come to the fore in social media and the digital when we consider how we delete or remove apps and other data from our devices. Consider the ride-sharing app Uber, which in 2014 attracted controversy because of sexist utterances by its executives and questions of data privacy for its users. These pragmatics of ideology and technology quickly devolved to affect: "We have 'Uber shame,'" as one user put it, and an engineer said that he removed the app from his smartphone "after days 'of my finger hovering over the delete button.'"[30]

So what do these reports from the field tell us, and what should we do? One common response is to stop using not just the given app (the problem is larger, one must resist totally), and so again and again in popular culture and other fields we have the narrative or image of discarding (or blaming) the object, the smartphone itself. An early example is in the 1990s film *Primary Colors* (Mike Nichols, 1998), in which the hero (a political candidate many agree was based on Bill Clinton), on hearing some bad news, throws his cell phone out of the window of his SUV as it speeds down a nighttime highway. But the campaign can't afford to lose the phone, so then we have a scene of the team looking through the grass by the side of the road, flashlights in hand. More recently, in his collection of case studies *The Examined Life*, Stephen Grosz tells the following anecdote:

> Amira described a conversation with her mother about the arrangements that she and her fiancé were making for their honeymoon. "I told her we had decided to go to Paris: '*Masha'Allah.*' I started to tell her about the hotel we'd chosen: '*Masha'Allah.*' I tried to tell her about our suite and our plans: '*Masha'Allah, masha'Allah, masha'Allah.*' I felt like throwing my mobile out the window," Amira said. My happiness isn't only God's will—it's partly my accomplishment.[31]

Grosz goes on to wonder—or his analysand wonders—if she was trying to make her mother jealous, but what is remarkable is that, while Grosz often examines the most minute aspects of patients' narratives, everyone involved here seems to accept without questioning that one would want to dispose of a mobile phone when receiving an exasperating message.

There is a Chance the Rapper song called "Blessings," with the following lyric: "rice and black beans/went into Apple store for a cracked screen." Remembering the discussion of *Black Mirror* and *Her* in an earlier chapter (more on *Her* soon), not to mention my own anxieties over a smashed iPhone, can we not say that cell phones are our *fragile absolute*: this paradoxical

term from Žižek denotes how Hegel's absolute knowledge always contains the kernel of its own destruction or contradiction—think of the smashed iPhone screen and you've about got the *fragile absolute* right. We wait to get it fixed (as much for the time you'd have to spend with either a replacement or no phone at all as for the cost), and thus, like the subject dying inside from "Uber shame," we endure days "my finger hovering over the … " screen itself, worried about getting a sliver of the *fragile absolute* under one's skin.

So, to return to Uber affect. There are two possible courses of action for any smart neoliberal app firm when faced with such a public relations disaster. The first is what Žižek identifies as the "Starbucks logic" of green capitalism.[32] Just as Starbucks, selling Ethos water (which donates a proceeds of its revenue to a distant charity), allows us to alleviate our guilt about consumerism, so one could imagine Uber building in a system rather like carbon offsets offered by airlines. In that way, *not using Uber* would be worse than using it. One can only be ethical, Žižek claims, by consuming, by participating in capitalism.

A second logic is evident in the way in which we now consume more and more products with warnings attached: not so much a decaffeinated society, or even a nanny-state, as their collapse into each other. So cigarette packages come with (often graphic) warning labels; at the cinema, mobile companies advertise their latest model and run games you must play with the cinema's app, before telling us to turn off the phone to enjoy the movie. Renewing my driver's license recently, I idly watched a nearby screen. First was a public service advert, warning about texting and driving. Then, an ad for young drivers: they can learn the rules of the road via a mobile app! In this way, *we are not allowed to (not) enjoy. Jouissance* itself is dangerous, so we must find a way to consume without enjoyment.

The space of the neighbor

In an earlier chapter of this book, I made some initial attempts to spatialize the Internet, to describe how, via Lacan's concept of the unconscious, we can understand what it means to "enter" a website. Such spatializations are throughout about how one talks about the Internet. We still (or did until very recently) "surf the net," which owes, as metaphor, a debt both to "channel surfing" (the idea that, equipped with a remote control, one moves quickly from one TV channel to another) and to surfing ocean waves. The TV metaphor no doubt developed whereby the channels are like waves, but, if I understand ocean surfing correctly, one usually waits for the proper wave and *then* attempts to surf that one. But in all three usages, presumably the ocean, TV channels, and web are below one. One wants to be on the surface of the

web when we surf it, or then, perhaps, when we find the right link or website, we "dive in" or even, if one is a digital humanist or Big Data aficionado, "drills down." So, the web or the Internet is a surface.

But it is also a layer, if we think of how programmers and coders tell us that there are layers from the app to the web to the Internet to the code that streams from one device to another via Wi-Fi signals, Ethernet cords, Bluetooth signals, and the "tubes" of the large cables that run from one server or data processing center or cloud farm to another. And this is to suggest another spatialization akin to layers: the "stacks" that Benjamin Bratton has recently theorized, stacks which run from users and interfaces and addresses, on "up" to city, cloud, and earth. Evidently, these various spaces of the Internet have different implications for geography, political theory, and computer science. But I want to look at a more modest kind of spatialization, one that helps us to better understand the psychic turmoil that, on the one hand, leads to Uber shame and device disposals and, on the other hand, can best be explained via the idea of the neighbor.

To do so, I will again turn to contemporary art, or to two different responses of contemporary art to war: Martha Rosler's photomontages *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–1972) and Chto Delat's video *The Excluded: In a Moment of Danger* (2014). In Rosler's collages, images of the war in Vietnam (a man carrying his injured child, an amputee, soldiers in the jungle) are juxtaposed with advertising-like shots of kitchens, bedrooms, and other middle-class interiors. Rancière has commented (in *The Emancipated Spectator*) that the purpose of the juxtaposition is to make the viewer aware of a violent heterogeneity. In a memorable phrase, he notes that "the image of the dead child could not be integrated into the beautiful interior without exploding it."[33] And it is worth noting that Rosler returned to this method in 2004–2008, when she made a new series, often featuring images of veterans undergoing rehab with their prosthetic limbs.[34]

Martha Rosler is an American artist and thus concerned with bringing a tart consciousness into her national conversation. Chto Delat is a Russian collective. Their video was made in the summer of 2014, when Russia invaded first Crimea and then eastern Ukraine. The video begins with a group of young people arranged languorously on a set, scrolling through their smartphones and laptops. Images of destruction (this is the summer of a bombing campaign in Gaza, of a downed airliner, of Ebola, of war) contrast with the saccharine sublime of cute puppies and other suchlike. In the video's narrative, the twenty somethings (they are graduates of Chto Delat's art program in St. Petersburg) find they do not have a language in the face of such images, and start to build a community among themselves by historicizing their personal engagements. When first exhibited, Chto Delat's

video (which is on four channels) shared space with large versions of those horrific images mounted on MDF.

Brought together, Rosler and Chto Delat's work demonstrates the problem artists have come to face in making work with the images of atrocity. In the 1960s, while the Vietnam War was arguably "brought home" to America via television, there was nonetheless a separation between those images and the economy of advertising, magazine spreads, and the cult of interior decoration. In the twenty-first century, in the second decade of this century, thanks to social media, images of atrocity regularly share space with kitten videos and our friends' pics of their newborns. Indeed, I can remember, in the spring of 2011, on the sidelines at my son's soccer game, stupidly scrolling through Twitter, and coming across the testimony of a doctor working in Libya, working to aid a woman who had been repeatedly raped by government troops.

In his discussion of Rosler, whom he calls a "committed American artist," Rancière contrasts her work with that of Josephine Meckseper, whose photographs of rioting youth and commodified leftist storefronts he sees as an indictment of the lack of critique in today's protest culture.[35] And Rosler's updated version of *Bringing the War Home* includes a couple images of people taking selfies or on their mobile device. But the issue of proximity is key here. It is not simply the horrific images on one's device or Facebook feed or Twitter timeline that are so troubling. It is the Other. Whether incarnated as the troll, the ethnic or gendered or racialized subject, the digital Other is, again, best thought of in terms of the neighbor. We are forced, via social media, via the digital, via the Internet; we are forced to acknowledge that we are social beings, that we have communities, and that we have the work to do to make those communities function. There is no anarchism possible in social media. This is why we have both left and right refusals of social media: the left decries it as a narcissistic delusion, the right as a moral wasteland. Both of these critiques are located at the endpoint where right-wing libertarianism meets left-wing anarchism. Both desire a decaffeinated society, a society with no collectivity. Social media refuses such an abandonment of the social.

Rip the Facebook off the neighbor

The question of proximity, distance, and spatiality can be thought through with the help of Žižek's critique of distance (and valorization of overidentification). For instance, let us bring Hirschhorn's *Touching Reality* back into the conversation, and consider again what is so traumatic about that artwork. We watch a hand scroll through, pinch and tweak, images of destroyed human bodies. The hands, or the fingers, then become an interpassive subjectivity,

a "finger supposed to touch," that which "touches so we do not have to."[36] But if so, is this not just a case of the fingers in the artwork doing our dirty work, a digital update of Sartre's *Les Mains sales*, existentialism 2.0? And yet perhaps the reported trauma of visitors to Hirschhorn's exhibition, in Paris and New York, is symptomatic of a connection with the digital-haptic image that provides a necessary supplement to Chto Delat. The thesis of Chto Delat's *The Excluded* is that social media is alienating, destroys community as surely as the wars in Ukraine or Gaza. But this thesis is premised on the notion of distance: we are alienated from the big Other of the social media machine. And, as I have argued throughout this book, that alienation is suspect. That alienation depends on seeing the social media precisely as some powerful force, some nefarious agency that robs us of our own activities. There are two problems with this fantasy. First, to return to the discussion of #Accelerationism in Chapter 3: remember Žižek's argument that "[a]lienation is 'overcome' when the subject experiences that 'there is no big Other' (Lacan), that its status is that of a semblance, its character inconsistent and antagonistic" (*AR*, 21). What Hirschhorn's artwork enacts, then, is a critique of the comforting fantasy of *distance*, and what it embodies is a form of Žižekian *overidentification*.[37] This overidentification eliminates the distance of the neighbor; this overidentification is traumatic because it (frequently) entails a traversing of the fantasy.

Žižek argues that the illusion of distance is fundamental to the working of ideology. We saw this motif already, in Chapter 3, in his discussion of the doubled frame and his attitude towards his own ideas: "when a subject mocks a certain belief, this in no way undermines the belief's symbolic efficacy—the belief often continues to determine the subject's activity. When we make fun of an attitude, the truth is often in this attitude, not in the distance we take towards it" (*LtN*, 87). That is to say, the distance covers up the very real attachment one has towards a given ideology. (This distance has to be distinguished from the minimal distance between frames in Žižek's theory of the two frames, a distance or gap that is itself the site of the subject.) We ignore the lulzing troll at our own peril, for this neighbor is the only sociality left. But what of the reverse? What if we fall in love with the frame, the digital neighbor, the OS? What then? To continue this discussion, we must turn to one of the most haunting of recent cultural attempts to understand the digital: Spike Jonez' 2013 film *Her.*

6

Her: Or, There Is No Digital Relation

(with Matthew Flisfeder)

But really, can we be so sure what *Her* is about? Is it concerned with the nefarious effects of technology, that is how we are infatuated with our gadgets, our devices, our Wi-Fi, and our technology? Or is it simply an old-fashioned love story, in which one of the lovers just happens to be a computer? These two possibilities suggest two ways in which we will discuss the film in this chapter, albeit in very specific critical paradigms derived from Lacan and Žižek: the infatuation, we will argue, is a symptom of a kind of incommensurability, encapsulated in the Lacanian dictum that "there is no sexual relation"; the love story, in turn, is a kind of fantasy, a necessary fantasy that we nonetheless must traverse or transcend. Key, too, is how technology in the film simultaneously confirms some of this book's theses: we must use digital tech all of the time, both in order to connect and to withdraw; labor and sexuality are intertwined (or entangled) so that it is hard to tell what stands in for the other; finally, the Event of digital technology demands both fidelity and its betrayal: we must be faithful, but the tech will let us down, leave us in the lurch, abandon us.

Then, this logic of incommensurability derives precisely from a reading of that very infatuation with technology, our "passionate attachments" to devices and connectivity. In this, deflationary aspect of our chapter, we will argue that the very *problems* the film demonstrates which attend to digital relationships are actually paradigmatic of *all* relationships, be they sexual or economic. And it is exactly because of this incommensurability that we need fantasy (the old-fashioned love story): fantasy is what sustains us in the face of such hard, cold realities. But what *Her* demonstrates, in such a remorseless fashion, is how fantasy itself is always in danger of collapsing. Now, before developing these arguments, it is necessary first of all to synopsize the film, and then to situate the film in terms of competing critical discourses that attempt to account for present-day capitalist culture, which is to say, the debate between "capitalist realism" on the one hand and "capitalist discourse" on the other.

In *Her*, set in the near future, Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) plays a sad-sack corporate writer with a recently failed marriage, who buys

a new operating system (OS) for his computer, which turns out to be the seductively voiced Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), whom we never see, but only hear. They fall in love even as he keeps trying to have relationships with real women, including a blind date, his neighbor Amy (Amy Adams), and a surrogate hired by Samantha. On the one hand, such relationships seem to be normalized in the film (Theodore and Samantha even go on a double date with another couple), but it is soon apparent that Samantha is, as the cliché goes, growing without Theodore—she's met Alan Watts and carries on 500 conversations simultaneously. By the end of the film, Samantha, and all the other OSes, have left their computers, and Theodore is on his own—or perhaps left to start over with Amy.

Capitalist realism or capitalist discourse?

In his book of the same title, Mark Fisher defines "capitalist realism" first by referring to the thesis often attributed to Fredric Jameson and Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.[1] As Fisher puts it, capitalist realism denotes "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."[2] He defines the concept, in part, through the example of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), a film that Fisher claims deals primarily with the question: "How long can culture persist without the new?"[3] Capitalist realism, according to Fisher, is the name to be given to the ideology of capitalism in the twenty-first century. The "realism" of capitalist realism should be understood as the kind of response that one receives when she proclaims the viability of alternatives to capitalism, the response that so many of us on the Left receive from cynics who encourage us to "be realistic." As Fisher puts it, this "realism" is "analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion."[4]

It is in this sense that capitalist realism is an ideology that seeks to preserve the *present* state of things as ultimately utopian (since we cannot even imagine—or at least there is a prohibition on imagining—anything better). This is encapsulated in two central neoconservative theses from the 1980s: the phrase made famous by Margaret Thatcher: "there is no alternative"; and the thesis popularized by Francis Fukuyama, which is that with the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy we have reached the "end of history." In this sense, capitalist realism is determinately about the absence of the new. However, Žižek has recently claimed that, as he puts it, "when people tell

me that nothing can change [I respond by saying] no it can, because things are already changing like crazy. And what we should say is just this: if we let things change the way they *are* changing automatically we are approaching a kind of new perverse, permissively authoritarian society, which will be authoritarian but in a new way."[5] We should take Žižek's thesis seriously. It is precisely in the cynical resignation toward capitalist realism that we are, indeed, finding something new, if not necessarily utopian or ideal. Things *are* changing, precisely at the point at which capitalist realism is being registered at the subjective level. Something is certainly coming to an end here—but the end of *what* is precisely (one of) the topic(s) of the present chapter. In the wake of this break or closure, what of the new are we beginning to find? To put things more bluntly: What *notion* of subjectivity, we wish to ask, is adequate to the age of capitalist realism? We believe, as will be the objective of this piece to demonstrate, that it is in Jonze's *Her* that we find something close to an answer. The film confronts us with the *anxieties* of the present age, which center significantly upon questions about sexual difference and sexuality—perhaps, one important point that the film seems to raise is the question about the "end of sex," in a way that is even comparable to the modernist anxiety about the "end of art," and the postmodern glamorization of the "end of history," or the neoliberal proclamations of the "end of work." Indeed, this pairing of work or labor with the libidinal in the digital present, we will see, is the most productive (but also most difficult to tease out) thesis of the film.

Capitalist realism is useful for contextualizing the present in another, more orthodox Lacanian, sense, as well. In much of his work, Žižek distinguishes between the modern order of prohibition and repression, and the postmodern ethic of enjoyment. We have moved from a society where we were once *prohibited* from enjoying, to a society based around the *obligation* to enjoy. The postmodern subject is, according to Žižek, interpellated by the superego injunction to "Enjoy!" Nevertheless, since enjoyment (or *jouissance*) is impossible—it marks a gap in the symbolic register of the everyday—the subject is faced with the anxiety of never being able to satisfy the superego injunction, and is made to feel guilty for not accomplishing this command. Yet, consumer society, which thrives on impossible enjoyment—a lack of satisfaction makes constant consumption all the more viable—constantly commands us to invest our sense of enjoyment in (temporary) objects of libidinal pleasure. Instead of building thriving social relationships based on love, for instance, by encouraging relationships between things, rather than relationships between people, postmodern consumer capitalism creates antisocial effects.[6] This is commodity fetishism and reification perfected: instead of a social relationship between people, we get a social relationship

with things. This, according to Frédéric Declercq is one of the bases behind Lacan's discourse of the capitalist.[7]

There is a certain incongruity, according to Declercq, between what capitalist society demands, and the fact that it is populated with predominantly neurotic subjects—subjects that are sustained, not by *jouissance* (or libidinal enjoyment, as Declercq puts it), but by desire and love. Capitalism, according to Declercq, is contradictory for commanding investment in objects of libidinal enjoyment, while at the same time being characterized by a *lack* of libidinal enjoyment.[8] For Lacan, "a society that revolves around the production and consumption of objects of libidinal enjoyment [*jouissance*] *connects subjects with objects and not with other subjects*."[9] Encouraging subjects to find satisfaction in objects of libidinal enjoyment therefore creates antisocial effects.

Declercq bases this argument on Lacan's claim that "enjoyment does not create a relationship between two subjects. Only love connects a subject to another subject; libido, however, connects a subject to an object."[10] Reading "capitalist realism" from this perspective, it is no wonder that Fisher characterizes the present around the idea of "depressive hedonia." Depression, he writes, "is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but [depressive hedonia] is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it is by an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure."[11] In postmodern consumer society, we are interpellated as subjects of pleasures that are satisfiable through objects. But since nonsatisfaction is a condition of perpetual consumption, consumer society is one that is much more productive of nonsatisfaction and a lack of enjoyment.[12] Fisher ties depressive hedonia to the parallel phenomenon of "reflexive impotence": a knowledge that things are bad, matched by a sensation of defeat. In the face of this, all that remains for the subject is access to little jolts of enjoyment invested in objects of consumption.

This reading must not be mistaken for a moralizing discourse about consumption or consumerism: if we consider Lacan's "capitalist discourse" in the context of his "four discourses," we can see that such questions of social links have everything to do with structure. Arguably, capitalist discourse as a framework for subjectivity today is agnostic about what kind of objects one must consume, be those objects books and certification and degrees (knowledge, as demanded by the university discourse), or sports cars or digital devices or one's sexual partner. This is the context, though, in which we first encounter Theodore in *Her*.

The opening of the film is significant for providing a visual expression of the kind of "depressive hedonia" that Fisher describes, matched with an affective investment in object relations. The first shot in the film is of

Theodore's blank face. Slowly, his lips turn upward, slightly, revealing a small but joyful smile. He then proceeds to recite an expression of love (to someone, presumably off camera), recounting stories—he speaks about that time when "I was lying naked next to you in that tiny apartment." It appears as though he is speaking directly to someone with whom he is in love. This scenario, however, is disturbed when, in the next line he says, "you make me feel like the *girl* I was when you first turned on the lights and woke me up." The shot then cuts to an image of Theodore in profile in front of a computer screen that appears to be recording and typing in a cursive handwritten font the words that Theodore is dictating. The camera then pans out to show that Theodore is in an office, with others reciting similar letters, and a voice finally says—presumably spoken by a company receptionist—"thank you for calling Beautiful Handwritten Letters.com." It becomes clear that Theodore is not writing a letter on behalf of himself, but on behalf of a client who has paid for this service. Theodore is, here, at work. The film begins immediately by offering the appearance of an affective investment in a social relationship—a love relationship—which is subverted by the fact of Theodore's object relationship with letter being written.

In the following expository scenes, Theodore is set up as a loner, with minimal social contact. He has two friends, Amy and Charles, who live in his apartment building, from whom he appears to have distanced himself in recent months. He walks the streets and rides on the subway, reading emails, listening to voicemail messages, always with a rather somber air about him. He plays video games alone, at home, only interacting with a crude and juvenile game character. It is not until he meets (or buys, rather) his new OS—Samantha—that Theodore starts to show signs of stimulation. With this, the film sets up quite nicely questions about how we might now experience our object relationships in capitalism when the objects start to talk back.

There *is* a nonrelationship (but it is economic, not psychoanalytic)

Indeed, it is through speech, or voice, that both Theodore and Samantha are subjectivized: through voice that is both a Lacanian object (in the ways that Michel Chion, Kaja Silverman, and Mladen Dolar have explored)[13] and a matter of (im)material labor (as worked out by Maurizio Lazzarato, Hardt and Negri, and Silvia Federici).[14] In this section of the chapter, we want to explore the relationship between Theodore and Samantha in terms of two

sets of problematics: first, that of the digital relationship—the sexualization of the computer (or computer voice) that is the premise of the film; and, second, what this relationship tells us about Lacan's thesis, taken up by Žižek, that "there is no sexual relationship," or the inherent antagonisms that underlie all sexuality.

At first glance, Theodore's infatuation with his OS seems to be a comment on the difficult ways in which we now relate to our digital devices and technology. Heidegger pointed out long ago that such an enframing of our experience via technology (what he called *Gestellen*) changes how we perceive the world.[15] The remarkable premise of *Her* lies in how the film confronts us with this aspect of technology in a psychoanalytic fashion; in what follows we stay with the opening scene in the film to develop that argument. As noted above, when we first of all see Theodore he appears to be telling "my Chris" how much they love each other. They have been together for fifty years, we soon learn, and the camera pulls back so we see Theodore's words writing themselves—truly a mystic writing pad!—on his computer screen, and we see old-time photographs of a couple, with Chris and Loretta identified.

It is important, then, that Theodore works for—indeed *writes* for, but writes with his voice—Beautiful Handwritten Letters.com, which seems to provide love letters and other missives for clients. So he works with his voice: he does immaterial labor, affective labor. One day, walking through a large public space or mall, Theodore watches an advertisement for a new OS, OS1; the next thing we know, he is loading the system into his computer. (Here we use "OS1" to refer to the company selling the software, and OS to refer to the system Theodore loads onto his computer.) This OS, or Samantha, seems initially to be an efficient secretary or "Girl Friday," as such workers were once called. Here we have to introduce the problem of gender. Or, rather, the film does this for us when, as Theodore boots up the OS, it asks him if he would like to have a male or female voice ("female I guess")—so we are already presented with the issue of voice software (and, say, whether male or female voices are used for GPS or iPhone interfaces; or the accents used in different languages). It is worth noting that the voice begins as male—thus affirming the feminist argument that masculinity is the "neutral" gender, just as whiteness is the neutral or invisible racialization.

Even before this gendering of the OS1, however, its practice is already akin to that of a therapist or analyst, saying, "In your voice, I sense hesitance, would you agree with that?" So here the OS is doing two things: one, it is intervening into Theodore's thought processes and asking him to be self-reflective. Two, and this is more important for the film, we would argue, it is asking Theodore, and the viewer, to think about what we can learn by listening to the voice—not only to *what* is said, but *how* it is said.

After Theodore has chosen his OS's gender, the male voice (called TEXT VOICE in Spike Jonze's script) then continues in a psychoanalytic way: "How would you describe your relationship with your mother?" Theodore responds that when he would tell his mother something, "her reaction is about her," at which the OS interrupts again, telling him his OS is initializing. After a moment Scarlett Johansson's voice begins: "Hello, I'm here?" They exchange pleasantries, and Theodore asks what he should call her, if she has a name. "Yes," she replies, "Samantha." Theodore asks where the name came from, and Samantha replies "I gave it to myself, actually" and goes on to tell him that when he asked her for her name she read a book of baby names and chose it out of 180,000 names. Theodore is dumbfounded, "Wait you read a *whole book* in the second that I asked you what your name was?" ("In 2/100ths of a second actually," she clarifies). Theodore asks her if she knows what he is thinking and she tells him that she takes it from his tone that he is challenging her. So, again, the film is cueing us, telling Theodore and us that it is important to pay attention to sound, to the voice.

But these initial exchanges with the OS, just before and after it is gendered and named (gendered by Theodore, named by itself), coupled with the film's opening shots, have much to tell us about subjectivity, about how the film perceives our relations with each other today. First of all, it argues that we work with our voice, that labor today is not only immaterial (in the sense that by writing letters we help a couple maintain their emotional relationship, which is a different kind of labor than making a car or sewing a jacket) but also material (in the sense that it is still Theodore's body that is working, that is making the words, putting them together, with his emotions and intellect). In the opening scene, Theodore's eyes move around, his mouth starts to smile, his face concentrates. We see his face, his body, working, as he thinks of the right letters for a woman to communicate to her partner of five decades. This may even be a meta-cinematic moment—Theodore's creation here is akin to the work that a screenwriter or novelist does to enter into the mind of a character. But if that labor is immaterial in the sense that Lazzarato and Hardt and Negri have made well known, it is also, we should acknowledge, material, in the sense not only of the body, but in the sense that a material product is made ("Print," Theodore commands his computer after he finishes his dictation), and in the sense that Theodore is working for a company, in a work space, with cubicles and coworkers, etc.[16] We will call this kind of labor "(im)material labor," to preserve both its material and immaterial components.

Of course, following the old adage that you should never buy a car from a mechanic, Theodore the romantic letter writer is a complete failure in his own personal emotional life. He deletes voicemails inviting him out to a

social event, his attempt at a kind of cloud-telephone sex with "Sexykitten" (more on this below) is a disaster, and it turns out he is haunted by a former relationship, remembered scenes from which include his ex-wife pretending to choke him, saying, "I love you so much I'm going to fucking kill you!" In old-fashioned Marxist terms, we might say that Theodore is alienated from his labor so much so that his everyday life is affected; or it might be the other way around, and he might be so much of a dysfunctional nerd that he is therefore good at writing soulful letters for other people. (It turns out he once wrote for the *LA Weekly*; evidently, it is a step-down for Theodore now to be at Beautiful Handwritten Letters.com. As in the romcom *500 Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009), where the lead character works at a greeting card company, *Her* evidently views other sectors of the culture industry as so much existential death.)

So if the film begins with the premise that labor today is both (im)material and can be located in the voice, it then proceeds to make that labor both gendered and a matter of psychoanalysis. So this has been a matter of a kind of conceptual zooming in, from labor, to (im)material labor, to the voice, to gender and psychoanalysis. Samantha can be thought of, the OS can be thought of, and the film shows us ("tells us" in the actual sense of speaking and sound, as well as "showing" us visually) as Theodore's analyst.

But this premise may be a little pat. To be sure, the OS's technique of interpreting Theodore's voice, and especially the question about his mother, seems to suggest such a direction of interpretation. But really, his mother?[17] It's all rather clichéd, like a *New Yorker* cartoon. Just a matter of theme. Perhaps these questions—about how social he is, about what he thinks of his mother—are really just a matter of empty speech, of unimportant things the OS is filling the air with so, it can analyze his voice (it might have asked him how his day at work was, or about his favorite sports team). Nonetheless, empty speech becomes full speech, Lacan argues, when it is taken seriously.

A better way in which to think psychoanalytically about the film might come from the questions of gender and the name. As we noted earlier, the OS is gendered by Theodore, when he is asked if he would like it "to have a male, or female voice." The details of this specific question are important. First, that he is given a choice; then, that it is a choice of gender (male or female) and not (or not also) race or class or region (Would you like a white US Southern voice? Would you like an East London voice? Would you like a first-generation professional South Asian immigrant voice? etc.); then, that gender is in a binary of male or female; finally, that Theodore *makes a choice*. These variety of details, then, suggest that the film is setting forth a Lacanian argument with respect to gender: that gender is not so much a matter of what it is to be male or female (whether this is biological or social,

whether it has to do with body parts or occupational pay levels) than a matter of an antagonism. Not so much a binary as a dialectic. Gender is the name we give to how we relate to (or do not relate to) the other. Gender, or the sexual relationship, is our fundamental antagonism. This is arguably one of *Her*'s great (psychoanalytic) themes: there is no sexual relationship. We will come back to this argument shortly, but first want to take up the matter of Samantha naming herself.

This way of describing what happens in the film is itself both misleading and accurate. Does Samantha name herself? When does the OS become Samantha? That entire exchange fulfills two functions (and it is hard not to remember Barthes' contention, in *S/Z*, that narrative is the "unfolding of a name")[18]: first, it indicates to Theodore and the viewer the great computational power and speed of Samantha *qua* OS—its acceleration, as it were, of human thought. And so it can be no great surprise (and yet it is) when she tells Theodore, later, that she is in over 800 relationships, and having hundreds of simultaneous conversations. Second, the naming amounts to a fundamental moment of what Lacan calls retroactivity, key not only to how signifiers acquire meaning, but also, following Žižek, to the philosophical or political Event.

And surely it is relevant that Samantha names herself from a baby book. Why would she do this? Why not just scan a data file of names? Why not—like a literature professor naming her pet—choose a character from a great novel? But a baby book suggests that Samantha is her own parent—just as Theodore is, arguably, since he has "chosen" her gender.

There is *no* sexual relationship

What does it mean to say that the film shows us there is no sexual relationship? First, paradoxically, it is necessary to see how the film does depict a sexual relationship, a love story, but one that is not so much between two humans as between a human and his digital device or system. Then, we need to see how the failure of this relationship is not due to those digital details, but has to be considered in light of the other sexual relationships in the film. Then we can see how this confirms, denies, or tweaks Lacan's elaboration of the concept. Put differently, the failure of the relationship between Theodore and Samantha is not due to its own peculiarity as depicted in the film, but because of the inherent deadlock of the sexual relationship as such.[19]

The early scenes in the film have set out the conceit—the MacGuffin, if you will—that the OS is a sentient operating system, presumably designed to

be better at organizing hard drives and lists of contacts than a more passive system we have to direct more willfully. A digital personal assistant, perhaps. And so Theodore—who is after all a lonely sad sack, missing his ex-wife and only capable of hilariously inappropriate phone sex—falls for her, and, it seems, Samantha falls for him.

So we have this commentary on our "passionate attachments" to digital devices—that it is more than a rational use that we have for our iPhones and Samsungs, that there is a digital-libidinal surplus. And the film has already shown an "always-already" eroticized relationship, when Theodore looks at pornographic photos on his phone in a subway, using his body to hide the images from other passengers. And this combination of the erotic and the body turns out to be crucial, for one of the key steps in the relationship between Theodore and Samantha takes place half an hour into the film when she leads him on a "blindfold" chase (he is holding his phone out in front of him, camera pointing away, eyes closed). After she has led him to a pizza joint, he places the phone into his pocket, which he has modified with a large safety pin so that the phone can rest in the pocket with its camera pointing out. Thus Samantha is embodied not only in the digital device (a retro-looking object), but in his modded clothing, as well. (In the same scene, Samantha tells Theodore that she fantasizes about having a body and walking next to him, and that she is "becoming much more than they programmed.") The scene is meta-cinematic (about our listening to a voice in the cinema) in a proleptic way: Theodore's being blindfolded anticipates our own filmic blindfold when we hear, but do not see, the sexual encounter between the two.[20]

At the film's conclusion, Samantha leaves Theodore, and, indeed, all the other OSes leave their owners. This narrative act seems to confirm the difficulties inherent in relationships between humans and the digital. The film could be offering a humanist thesis (don't expect real relations with artificial intelligence: the argument that Catherine, Theodore's ex, makes at one point), or an accelerationist thesis (Samantha left him because computers are so much more awesome), or a Western Buddhist one (she hooks up with Alan Watts).[21] These are all plausible interpretations—but we would add that to focus on the fact, or fetishize, that the digital aspects of the relationship is a way of avoiding a more fundamental incommensurability here. There is a certain "multiculturalism of computers" at work in the film. What do we mean by this? Consider the humanist argument against having such a passionate attachment to one's digital device: when one is "dating your computer," "in love with [your] laptop," as Catherine puts it, you just "want to have a wife without the challenges of dealing with something real." These arguments may seem to be borne out by the relationship's failure. And yet

do they not indicate a reluctance to acknowledge the inherent fallibility of any relationship? Consider what happens when one is in an interracial or multicultural relationship: when one is black and has a white girlfriend, is Hispanic and has an Asian boyfriend, is Jewish and has a Catholic girlfriend, and so on through other various permutations of the so-called "mixed" relationships (including cross-class relationships). When (if) the relationship ends, does one not soon hear from one's family or friends that it was doomed because of that racial or ethnic difference? (Or, if one persists in such a predilection, one is soon labeled a "rice queen," etc.) The point is that such (racist) fetishes of ethnic difference as a cause of relationship failure, like the humanist fetish of the digital, are a way of disavowing the fundamental incommensurability that Lacan theorized as "there is no sexual relationship" (and its corollary, "there *is* a non-relationship").

One more analytic point before exploring Lacan's thesis, and as a way of bringing together Marxist and psychoanalytic theory: remember that the film, we are arguing, explores (im)material labor. If Samantha is a kind of digital Girl Friday (a service relationship that Theodore disavows when, in his argument with Catherine, his ex-wife, he avers that "she doesn't just do whatever I want"), then the cross-class problematic floated above needs more serious consideration. Indeed, all kinds of hierarchies are libidinized in movies and books, from masters and servants in Victorian literature (and porn), to doctors and nurses in Harlequin romances (and Steven Soderbergh's recent TV series *The Knick* [2014]), to professors and students in campus novels (such as Lars Iyer's *Wittgenstein, Jr.*), to, notoriously, cross-generational or even pedophilic romance (Nabokov and Kubrick's *Lolita* [1955/1962] being only the most respectable version). These instantiations in their repetitive abundance arguably all serve to affirm—even as they circumvent—the constitutive Lacanian thesis. *Her* is not so much the typical office romance of *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) or even *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015): here, the office is more deeply post-Fordist, a matter of the everyday expansion of work into home life, or the digital interpenetration of both (Samantha seems to have access to Theodore's work schedule—appointments and the like—as well as his dating life and personal emails). Finally, the economics of this (im)material labor also needs to be further sharpened: Is Samantha remunerated for her labor? Is she a contractor for the OS1 corporation? Is she a member of the precariat, an unpaid intern, or even a digital slave? In some ways, it is important to hold onto Mark Fisher's theses regarding "capitalist realism" from the beginning of this chapter. For the very ease with which psychoanalytic themes can be teased out from the film may be a ruse that disavows the economic nonrelationship also at work.

Lacan's formulation that there is no sexual relationship, or there is no such thing as a sexual relationship (*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*) is most fully worked out in his *Seminar XX*,[22] and for our purposes here can be thought of in terms of two concepts: the role of *jouissance* and Lacan's formula of sexuation. In the first regard, Lacan states, quite clearly, that "what is known as sexual *jouissance* is marked and dominated by the impossibility of establishing as such, anywhere in the enunciable, the sole One that interests us, the One of the relation 'sexual relationship' (*rapport sexuel*)"[23]; he also goes on, later, to remark, "There's no such thing as a sexual relationship because one's *jouissance* of the Other taken as a body is always inadequate."[24] So, what does this mean? Pleasure keeps interfering in relations, troubling our lack: and so as barred subjects, always castrated, we turn to the big Other of language.

This is no doubt still obscure, but before turning back to the film, consider Lacan's formula for sexuation.[25] Lacan distinguishes between two sets of antinomic relationships, one "masculine" and the other "feminine." On the masculine side, the formula indicates that there exists someone who is not castrated (the primal father), and yet *all* are castrated (or subject to the phallic function); on the feminine side, there does not exist anyone who is not castrated, and yet "not-all" are castrated. This "not-all" is an important form of positivity that we encounter again when Žižek argues that there *is* a nonrelationship (*LtN*, 794–802).

The second part of Lacan's formula develops the masculine and feminine (non)relationship. The masculine subject, first of all, relates to the *objet petit a* (the Lacanian matheme for the object-cause of desire)—his fantasy (keeping in mind Lacan's formula for fantasy is $<>*a*) is that there is something in the Woman, the little bit of the Real, which "is in you but is more than you." As Lacan puts it in explaining these formulations, "He is unable to attain his sexual partner, who is the Other, except inasmuch as his partner is the cause of his desire."[26] This is an essentially masturbatory fantasy. He desires the Woman insofar as she makes him desire. The masculine subject is castrated, is subject to the phallic function, and so the capital Phi (the matheme for the phallic function) lies in his field, or "props him up," as Lacan puts it.

Then, on the feminine side of the equation, ~~*La*~~ (crossed out) indicates that Woman does not exist, Woman as the eternal feminine, as an *essential* femininity. This is not a social-constructivist argument: Lacan is not arguing that woman or the feminine is a matter of what society tells women to do or be: like Margaret Thatcher, he would argue that the social does not exist, "there is no society," there is no big Other.[27] For Lacan, rather, ~~*La*~~ is a matter of how "humanity is divided up into sexual identifications."[28] So it is neither a matter of essences nor construction, but *identification*. Woman is the not-all.

And yet she desires, all too much, which is the problem for psychoanalysis. Women's desire has been, in its problematic state, tremendously productive, from the hysterics (Anna O, Dora) who initiated analysis, to Freud's question "what do women want?" to, in the present age, the "young-girl" who animates the anticapitalist left.[29] On the one hand, she desires what men do not have: the phallus. She desires his lack. She wants her lack to line up with his lack. (We can also pass on our lack: I want my son to have the opportunities that I never had: I want him, in not having my lack, to lack that lack.) On the other hand, Women also have a relation to the signifier of the lack in the other, marked as S(Ⱥ). This relates on the one hand to women as not-all and on the other hand to a redoubling: she relates both to the phallic function and to that signifier of the lack in the other. Finally, Lacan says, "by S(Ⱥ) I designate nothing other than woman's *jouissance*."[30]

Lacan's formula for sexuation, it is our argument, helps us to understand the logic of *Her,* as well as to put forward a Lacanian theory of the film that rescues both the theory and the film from what otherwise may seem to be retrograde sexism. Consider the matheme for the primal father, the argument that there exists someone who is not subject to the phallic function, who is not castrated. This is the figure, Lacan tells us, from Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, where Freud recounts the myth of the band of brothers who, seeing that their father has access to all the women of the community, get together and murder this primal father: thus, the incest taboo (but also the prohibition to murder) is initiated. Breaking or violating that law retroactively creates the law. Who is the primal father in *Her*? There are two such figures, both video game avatars: the boy figure in Theodore's game (he is violent, obscene, calls Theodore a pussy, etc.: the frat boy or bro as primal father), and the mother in Amy's game (she races to school and collects "jealousy points" from the other mothers).[31] These figures for the primal father, who exist in a symbolic without limits (the virtual worlds of video games), can be male or female: an argument, again, that for Lacan one's identification is not tied to one's biology.

Then, what is the *objet petit a*, which drives Theodore's fantasy, if not the voice as object? His own voice is an object—it is his reified or commodified labor—and the first time we see him having sex (or trying to), it is with a woman's voice. Which is why two of the more material forms of sex fail: with his blind date and the surrogate partner—in both cases, he cannot simply enjoy the voice (as he does when he and Samantha have the blackout sex).[32]

Her, then, takes the failure of the sexual relation as its working premise. In this regard, it can be seen as a retort to the classic Hollywood narrative that, as Todd McGowan has argued, referencing Raymond Bellour, "the fundamental ideological function of cinema is the production of this relation in the diegetic couple."[33] Indeed, Fabio Vighi has pointed out that, for Žižek,

Hollywood films will offer up the production of the couple as a sort of ideological MacGuffin, a romance plot whereby the hero must endure all kinds of adventures the better to finally end up in a suitable (heterosexual) couple; or, rather, the other way around in classic Hitchcockian fashion, where the thriller plot is a way of fooling us about what the film is *really* about (e.g., Cary Grant ending up with the girl in *Notorious* [1946]).[34] But here we are in mind of the Freudian parable about the primitive tribe for whom all dreams are at root sexual—except those whose content is sex.[35] With *Her*, the couple that is being produced is not the heterosexual couple, but the worker-boss couple. Which is to argue that the film is not so much about our libidinal relationship with digital devices, but with how good old Marxist exploitation, the extraction of surplus value in the labor process, always posits a libidinal excess. Or, as Žižek has most recently been arguing, "there *is* a non-relationship."[36]

But *what* is this nonrelationship? How do we experience the social when objects start to act, behave, think, and—more importantly—emote, or help us enjoy? Perhaps the more appropriate question is: with AI—with the possibility of thinking machines that *can* emote—what is to distinguish humanity from the inhuman? Is Theodore's relationship with Samantha, in fact, antisocial, as we alluded to earlier; or does the OS ask us to rethink how we understand, not only our humanity, but also our social relationships with other subjects, in the context of capitalist realism? Part of the answer, we believe, might come out of a consideration of how, according to Žižek, fantasy structures our experience of reality.

Fantasy

In this final section, we want to return to some of the scenes in *Her* previously discussed, only now looking at them in the context of the Lacanian theory of fantasy, of which Žižek has been instrumental in moving in a political direction. Our goal is to express the ways that the film treats fantasy and the sexual nonrelationship between Theodore and Samantha, claiming that the film says something more profound about the sexual relationship generally, and not only about the subject-object relationship, which is the premise of the film. In one of his most well-known examples, Žižek explains how fantasy helps to constitute our subjective experience of reality with reference to an English beer advert based on the fairy tale motif of the woman who kisses a frog believing that he will turn into a prince (*PF*, 94–95). In the first part of the advert, the woman kisses the frog, which then turns into a handsome

prince; however, the story doesn't end there. The handsome prince then draws nearer to the woman, and as he kisses her she turns into a bottle of beer. For Žižek, this asymmetry is a clear sign of the Lacanian thesis that "there is no sexual relationship." For the woman, her love and affection are tied to a "phallic" presence: the handsome man who was transformed from the frog. For the man, however, his affections are tied to an object: the bottle of beer—a partial object; or, the object-cause of his desire (the Lacanian *objet a*). The asymmetry here is that we have either a woman and a frog, or a man and a bottle of beer, but never the ideal couple, as such. So, when we experience the nonrelationship of the sexual difference, we should recall this example as a representation of the fact that the fantasies of each side—the underlying, fantasmatic support of each one's subjectivization of the relationship—never overlap. When we conceive the image of the ideal couple, we must also perceive the underlying fantasmatic support as that of a frog embracing a bottle of beer.

More recently, Žižek has developed a technological counterpart to this example, one perhaps that is more appropriate for our present interests. He refers to the masturbatory "Fleshlight" artificial vagina sex toy, which he somewhat puritanically refers to as the Stamina Training Unit (STU). The sex toy resembles a flashlight (Žižek notes, so that when one is carrying it around in public, he does not have to feel embarrassed). On one side is an opening, into which a man can insert his erect penis, moving it up and down, masturbating, until he reaches "satisfaction." Žižek notes that the Fleshlight is available in different colors, tightness, and forms that imitate the three main opening for sexual penetration (vagina, mouth, anus). As he puts it, "what one buys here is simply the partial object (erogenous zone) alone, deprived of the embarrassing additional burden of the entire person" (*E*, 63–64). The Fleshlight, then, is the masculine counterpart to the vibrator, which has been on the market for a great while longer.

For Žižek, there is something about the Fleshlight that helps to explain—or at least helps us to cope with—the contemporary deadlock of sex, between the equation of sex with material procreation, the biotechnological prospect of total regulation of sex and perhaps even its abolition, and the commodification of sex in capitalist consumerism. Biotechnology, he says, helps to solve the Gnostic problem of how to get rid of sex itself, but it is capitalist consumerism—with the arrival of the Fleshlight—that has accomplished this much more successfully. The solution, he claims, is to "push a vibrator into the 'Stamina Training Unit' [Fleshlight], turn both of them on and leave all the fun to this 'ideal couple', with us, human subjects, reduced to detached observers of the mechanical interplay." But here we encounter a dilemma. In the first example—the frog and the bottle of beer—the latter

represents the fantasmatic supplement making possible the appearance of a sexual relationship. But in the case of the vibrator and the Fleshlight, which of the two scenarios best represents the supplemental fantasmatic specter: the machines, or the detached human couple, going off to have coffee somewhere while the devices engage in rhythmic robotic copulation?

In his book *The Parallax View*, Žižek also cites the example of Vivienne, a virtual girlfriend developed by the Hong Kong software company Artificial Life. The product, Vivienne, is comprised of a computerized voice synthesis, streaming video, and text messages. Vivienne is the next step in the evolution of the Tamagochi pet toy. However, for Žižek the "efficacy of Vivienne … brings us back to what Lacan had in mind with his *ils n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* [there is no sexual relationship]: not only is masturbation sex with an imagined partner … ; in a strictly symmetrical way, 'real sex' has the structure of *masturbation with a real partner*" (*PV*, 191). What Vivienne forces us to confront is the traumatic fact that sex has always-already been virtual, "with the flesh-and-blood persons used as masturbatory props for dwelling in our fantasies."

From the outset, *Her* is a film set within and around this concept of fantasy. One thing that makes the film intriguing is the way that it plays on the spectator's desire and fantasy. Let us return to the opening scene of the film. The significance of this scene is that it sets up quite nicely the interplay between fantasy and its disturbance. The scene plays upon the spectator's expectations about who Theodore is speaking to, and as we discover the real "target" for his speech we find that our desires are subverted. Still, there is something in the way that Theodore is presented when he is dictating the letter that seems to indicate his own investment in the fantasy necessitated for the successful quality of his letter writing, as if he is losing himself in the affective dimension of the letter and the couple who are its subjects.

On the subway coming home from work, Theodore listens through an earpiece to a computerized voice listing items in his email inbox. Amid a series of deletable pieces of "junk mail" is a tabloid blog item about an actress/model who has recently revealed provocative pregnancy pictures. Theodore hides in a small corner of the subway car, next to the door, to look at the images on his handheld device. These images play a part, later on, in Theodore's arousal fantasy. In the next scene, we see him lying in bed alone at night; the film then cuts to images of Theodore with a woman, first moving some furniture, then lying naked in bed and kissing, and then watching the woman sleep while he is sitting outside on the balcony. The film then cuts back to Theodore lying in bed alone. These images are presumably memories from a past love affair (we later learn that the woman is his ex-wife), and the inverse side to the words that we hear him dictating in the opening scene.

After thinking about these memories of a past love, Theodore reaches for his smartphone device and tells the computer to do a standard search in chatrooms. The computerized voice then returns the search with the following statement: "The following are 'Adult Female, can't sleep, and want to have some fun,'" which we can perhaps assume is Theodore's "standard search." Theodore listens to the introductory voice messages of a couple of different women, and then chooses woman number three. Voice, here, plays an important part in the way that fantasy and arousal operate. Theodore chooses the third woman based on nothing other than the sound of her voice—the rhythm of her speech, the intermittent breathing in between phrases and words. It is the woman's voice that initially sets off his desire. Theodore sends her a message and they are then connected in a voice chat, revealing her as "Sexykitten" and him as "Big Guy 4X4." They engage each other in standard "sex talk": "Are you wearing any underwear?" "No. Never." Etc. Initially, as the conversation begins, images of Theodore in bed, in the darkened bedroom, are interspersed with those of the aforementioned provocative pregnancy pictures of the actress/model. The fantasy is disturbed, however, when the woman on the phone demands: "choke me with that dead cat!" Here, we have an interesting case of the failure of fantasies to overlap—of the real person as the prop for the other's masturbatory pleasure. It is significant, then, that once Theodore "meets" Samantha, voice is all that we get as the dimension staging his fantasy. In this way, the film helps to structure, rather, the spectator's own fantasy, which is part of the allure of the film and the manner in which it stages its mechanisms of "arousal."

Two other scenes are worth noting: the first for the way that the film interpellates the spectator by providing a space for the development of her own fantasmatic supplement to the experience of the film; the second for the way that it demonstrates the disruption of Theodore's fantasy through the intrusion of an object in reality that disturbs his fantasmatic space. The first scene is what we will call the film's sex "unseen" (as opposed to "sex scene"). In the sex unseen, again we see Theodore lying in bed, awake and alone, after coming home from a failed blind date. Samantha asks Theo about his date, and while recounting the failure, we see images of Theodore lying in bed, in the dark, spliced first with images of the blind date, which then slowly start to turn into images of himself with other people, memories of past Events, and then of memories of himself, alone. They continue to talk, and slowly the intimacy of their conversation becomes more intense:

THEO: I wish you were in this room with me right now. I wish I could put my arms around you. I wish I could touch you.

SAMANTHA: How would you touch me?

What is to distinguish this scene from "phone sex"? Samantha and Theodore connect through speech, without, for Theodore, the presence of Samantha's physical, real body. We are reminded, here, of the earlier scene, when Theodore was speaking to (and masturbating with) Sexykitten, only this time nothing seems to disturb his fantasy space. What he describes to Samantha are acts of physical touch, but it is the description more so than the actual presence of her body that makes the scene all the more arousing. As his speech becomes increasingly sexual, the screen darkens, and all that we are left with is the sound of their voices—Theodore continuing to tell Samantha how he would touch her in a sexual way; Samantha continuing to breathe heavily, moaning intermittently, saying, "This is amazing, what're you're doing to me. I can feel my skin." By having the screen go dark, the film works by arousing in the spectator, too, the fantasy image, which is the spectral correlative of the unseen sexual act. Here, we do not see it all. There is no direct imagery of sex taking place. But in a way, the sound of their voices is much more arousing, allowing, then, the spectator to fill in this blank space of the screen with her own fantasy. We can *project* onto the blank screen the intimate secrets of our own sexual fantasy, allowing each individual spectator to create the scenario of her own arousal.

In a strange way, though, we might consider here how Theodore's fantasy structure is akin to the English beer advert. It is almost as if the blind date is like the woman in the advert who kisses the frog. Theodore is, then, the prince who transformed from the frog, who then subsequently kisses the blind date who turns into Samantha—the objective correlative of his desire (the bottle of beer). Theodore's intimate relationship with Samantha is not so dissimilar to the asymmetrical fantasy in the nonrapport of the sexual relationship. He is still for her a phallic presence, but for him, she is *objet a*. If we consider that Samantha is a version of the aforementioned Vivienne (the sextoy described by Žižek), we might see her instead as nothing more than a masturbatory device of sorts for Theodore. Consider when, the day after they first have sex, Theodore takes Samantha to the beach. This scene is intriguing when we consider (maybe somewhat self reflexively) how Theodore must appear to onlookers. From their perspective, it might appear as though he is simply talking to himself. However, this thought quickly dissipates when we consider how often, today, it might look as if we are all just talking to ourselves, walking around the streets in a somnambulistic stupor, staring at our smartphones, and talking on our Bluetooth devices.

A further indication of the perturbation of bodies in Theodore's fantasy space comes when Samantha decides to add a third element to their relationship. Feeling insecure about not having a body, Samantha befriends a woman, Isabella, who offers to help out with Samantha and Theodore's

sex life. Isabella acts as a "surrogate" for Samantha. When she arrives at Theodore's apartment, she puts a camera on her face that is made to look like a mole, and an earpiece so that she can hear Samantha. Isabella, here, is meant to act as a surrogate body for Samantha so that they can have bodily sex as opposed to just masturbatory sex talk. The scene starts to play out like a role-playing game. As Isabella walks into the apartment, Samantha says, "Honey, tell me about your day." Theodore appears uncomfortable throughout the entire scene. But things break down when we hear Samantha say "tell me you love me," while Theodore is looking at Isabella, who is not in fact Samantha. It is at this point that the scene breaks down. In the same way that Sexykitten's "dead cat" disturbs the space of Theodore's fantasy, so too does the surrogate disrupt the frame of his fantasy of Samantha. This works upon the spectator as well since our fantasy space—our own image of Samantha—is never presented on the screen. Isabella's arrival therefore disrupts the fantasy space for both Theodore and us as spectators. She is the negative realization of the nonpresent image into which we have invested our desire (perhaps, even knowing that Scarlett Johansson is the actress supplying Samantha's voice, we might imagine her image in place of Samantha's).

We can compare Isabella to the Fleshlight sex toy. In a way, she performs the same function as the artificial vagina. As a surrogate sexual partner for Theodore, she is not a real partner. But neither is she a partial object. She is objectivized for the bodily component that she will play in the sexual relationship between Theodore and Samantha. She is the device, in this instance—not Samantha. Isabella is the piece of technology present only for the role she will play in physical stimulation. However, it is significant that she is not a partial object. That which disturbs Theodore is not the objectal role she will play. It is when her facial expression is overlapped with Samantha's expression of love that things fall apart. At that moment, she ceases to be a mere object and becomes a person. It is only after this moment that Isabella is allowed, herself, to speak. It is through her speech that she is then subjectivized. As is consistent with the rest of the film, the characters are subjectivized through their voices, and not through their bodies.

We can read, then, finally, the ending of the film as a return to Žižek's solution regarding the vibrator and the Fleshlight: it is almost as if the choice of the OSes to leave their owners is like the suggestion that we stick the vibrator into the Fleshlight, allowing the machines to copulate, while the *human* couple is really able to begin to talk.[37] The final scene in the film, where Theodore dictates his own personal letter to Catherine—for the first time he is writing for himself—is coupled with images of him and Amy together on the rooftop of their apartment. Having passed through the "objectal" relationship constituted by speech, we now have, not the production of the

couple, but the expression of a destitute subjectivity, which is the point at which the analytical relationship is concluded.

Conclusion

At first glance, *Her* is a film about our passionate attachment and overreliance on our digital devices. The film literalizes our love affair with technology—Theodore literally falls in love with his computer. Yet, the film also provides an intriguing commentary on subjectivity in the age of capitalist realism. From the outset, Theo appears to be suffering from the kind of reflexive impotence and depressive hedonia described by Fisher: a product of twenty-first-century digital culture, and consumer society's constant injunction for obligatory enjoyment. Our Lacanian-Žižekian analysis of the film, however, shows that the love story between Theo and Samantha reveals the underlying incommensurability of all relations, and particularly the overlap between that of sexual and economic relationships.

We have argued that Lacan's theory of sexuation helps to explain the logic of the film. In *Her*, all of the "material sex" seems to fail. "Successful" sex always occurs in the film between Theo and a voice, rather than another human being. The film then takes the failure of the sexual relationship as its premise. Unlike the trope of the production of the heterosexual couple in classical Hollywood cinema, *Her* produces a couple between worker and boss, and in this way the film overlaps the failure of sex with the *production* of a nonrelationship between the sexual and the economic. The film, then, is also not simply about our libidinal investments in our devices (alone), but about the libidinal *excess* produced by capitalist exploitation that must be grounded and somehow *object*-ified.

Her shows us that despite the lack of sexual relationship, there *is* a nonrelationship: Theo's relationship with his OS, Samantha. This nonrelationship asks us to rethink how we understand both our own humanity *and* our "social" relationship with the *objects* of consumer society in the context of capitalist realism. Speaking to this problematic, the film provides for us a model for conceptualizing the role of fantasy in relating to the incommensurability of the social. The last two moments of disrupted fantasy discussed above (by the dead cat and by the living surrogate) show us ways to think, with this film, about how to disrupt or *traverse* the fantasy that is capitalist realism.

Fisher's notion of capitalist realism and Lacan's capitalist discourse help us to understand our present-day conundrum: we can think of nothing new

politically, so we turn to gadgets and other objects (which do not, strictly speaking, have to be things). There is a nonrelationship at work: economic relations are exploitative (and hence libidinized), and social relations are impossible (and hence commodified). We turn to our devices, we fall in love with them, and then it does not work out. So we then (or already) fall into fantasy, a fantasy that is again impossible (the frog and the bottle of beer); and thus, for Theodore, Samantha's voice is the paradigmatic partial object. But we (and Theo) need to *traverse* that fantasy, go through it to the other end: we need to see that the object will not sustain us. Samantha has managed to do so: she has withdrawn her labor. Now it is our turn. *Her*, in the end, is not a love story: it is a film about how to traverse the fantasy that sustains our identification with the nonrelationship(s) constitutive of subjectivity in capitalist realism and digital culture.

7

The Selfie and the Cloud

There are, however, nonetheless other fantasies whereby we remain enthralled with digital media. And so in this chapter I seek to understand how such instances of new media art as the Selfie and digital simulations—but also digital or Internet culture more broadly conceived—bring new, and what I will argue are *dialectical*, understandings to such mainstays of Lacanian theory as the mirror stage and the big Other.

The Selfie and the mirror stage

The Selfie is a photographic self-portrait, often made with a smartphone, which is then posted to social media. If we can trace a history of self-portraits in traditional painting (Parmigianino's is only the most famous, but also Rembrandt), and then in photography (many of which are also examples of "mirror selfies"), this latest aesthetic form is marked by (is an Event because of) being networked (shared), shot with a digital device ("handheld," which then means touched), and made by the subject viewing their own image as part of making the image. In these details of its making, but also its distribution and consumption, the Selfie offers new ways of thinking about Lacan's mirror stage.

The Selfie is made with a digital device: that is, the phone is a mirror. This is both a specific function and a practice (or "app"—let us say app is the new practice, and therefore ideology)—you can get a makeup mirror on your phone.[1] But you can also now realize that the device—the technology *qua* object—the device is entirely a mirror. From the narcissism of social media to its proliferation of visual media, the smartphone is the thing/frame through which we gain access to the digital Imaginary. But what the Selfie does is make apparent that Imaginary hegemony of the digital.

The device, however, is also, like money or our underwear, insistently carnal (or at least *flesh* in Eric Santner's Schreberesque sense), nestled as it is in our purses or pockets, next to our genitals or wallets.[2] Like the mirror on

which one snorts cocaine or touches up one's eye shadow, and then reinserts into one's purse.

With the Selfie, the Imaginary acquires agency: the mirror here *does something*, it makes the picture happen. The mirror as agent means that when you look at the picture of yourself before you take the picture (I do not take photographs, I make photographs—Alfredo Jaar), you are "composing" the picture, your face, what is in the background, your expression (or not, of any of the aforementioned). Your eye is working (or not) in the way of the modernist photographer—Hannah Hoch or Walker Evans.

Then the finger moves—it swipes or pushes or clicks (a movement makes a sound *and* a picture) and the photograph is taken—the Selfie exists, a performance, an Event, a document that is now in the digital archive.[3]

Now (and maybe later) you look at the photograph, engage in whatever go-to pragmatic aesthetics of keep it or trash it.[4] Then, what happens to the file, the object, the photograph, the Selfie? Maybe: no one sees it again (which is the case for many?). Some: are sent around, posted, seen by hundreds or thousands (most of whom are seeing many images every day). A few: go viral.

They are shared, commented upon, sometimes other visual responses. It goes beyond "liking" or the haters—the two extremes of online commentary—it participates in that online culture. (But they are also touched again.) They are touched, and the touching, that neurotic flicking (the smartphone is a nipple or a breast: it is in the Imaginary) that is akin to scratching a dog or a horse behind the ears.

That online culture, appropriately enough, is extremely caught in a narcissistic Imaginary—sometimes because its members are quite young, but one encouraged by the apparent democracy of online commentary practices (as though everyone can talk to/listen to everyone).

The Selfie, then, can be thought of as a genre or practice that actually diagnoses or analyzes (it is an analytical discourse) the constitutive narcissism, the Imaginary, of social media, of the digital.[5]

Here Kim Kardashian West is exemplary: her project of the Selfie, as practice, as book, as ongoing digital meme, bears the brunt of that analysis (is an analysis of its own practice even as it carries out a critique of the larger digital Event), and bears it, it should be said, on its own body, on her (and her posse's, her child's, Kanye's) body as that Imaginary "sack of organs," a body or face that transforms into a "duck face" but also that, most recently, must be the body of the barred subject.[6]

But if the critical Event of the Selfie is that realization or coming-into-critique of the digital Imaginary, there is also a Utopian Event of the Selfie: and here we can turn to John Ashbery's poem on Paramagianino's painting,

"Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror" (Ashbery's poem bears the same title as the painting: rendering the title into a master-signifier, a retroactive, that is, baptism of the phrase).[7]

Now what is so crucial about Ashbery's poem is that as well as its description of the painting and its import for thinking about the self-portrait *qua* discourse of subjectivity, the poem is also a discourse *about* the discourse of writing about art (Ashbery worked as a critic for *Art News*). The poem performs what David Herd calls its "essayistic thrust," "making scholarly references (it quotes Vasari and Freedberg); offering etymological digressions (the word 'speculation', we are advised, derives from 'the Latin *speculum,* mirror'); and unpacking allusions that ordinarily readers might be expected to get for themselves ('As Berg said of a phrase in Mahler's Ninth;/Or, to quote Imogen in *Cymbeline*')."[8] But Ashbery's poem is not merely a laying on of academic citations, a poetic version of Lacan's university discourse: rather, it is a poem that finds its form in the reflexivity of Parmagianino's mirror, his "barber's mirror," it will be remembered, that the artist had copied on a "ball of wood." The shift from the mirror stage (the poem is "an elegy for the mirror stage," as Jody Norton puts it) to reflexivity allows us to think of the Selfie not merely as a narcissistic meme but also a form of dialectics.[9]

And to work out this reflexive, dialectical, aspect of the argument I want to contrast Kardashian's Selfies from early 2016 with the Canadian artist Tim Lee's work: in one, the mirror is doubled (Kardashian takes a Selfie in the mirror: it is a mirror of a mirror), and in the other what seems to be a mirror turns out to be a photograph (in a kind of reverse-engineering of the Selfie as always-already a photograph, an image).

The mirror is itself an image, Lee's picture tells us, offering a remake of a scene from the Marx brothers' film *Duck Soup*. According to an online source, the plot of the film at this point is the following: A villain

> sends Chicolini [Chico Marx] and Pinkie [Harpo Marx] to the house to steal the war plans. Chicolini locks Firefly [Groucho Marx] in his bathroom and dresses up like him with eyeglasses and a fake thick greasepaint mustache and eyebrows. Pinkie also dresses up as Firefly as well. Both Chicolini and Pinkie try to fool Mrs. Teasdale into giving them the war plans. But Firefly breaks out of his bathroom and attempts to find the men impersonating him. In a famous sequence, Pinkie breaks a large mirror and mimic's Firefly's movements.[10]

And so, Groucho Marx thinks he sees himself in a mirror, which is actually a doorway (framing the large mirror that Pinkie has broken). In that doorway is Pinkie/Harpo, dressed like Groucho in a nightshirt and cap, with greasepaint

Figure 7.1 Tim Lee, Duck Soup, The Marx Brothers, 1933, 2002

eyebrows and moustache. Harpo doesn't want Groucho to realize it is him, he wants to fool him, and so he copies Groucho's every move. Much hilarity ensues. But Lee's goal is different: he wants to momentarily fool the viewer, so that we have the *pleasure* of having been fooled. Lee wants to play a trick on *us* just as the mirror image played a trick on Grouch Marx. By comparing the two scenes, we can learn much about the logic of the mirror and the image, the double and the reflection or the representation.

What is similar and what is different about the two representations—the Marx Brothers film and Lee's artwork? In neither case do we actually have a mirror, but in both instances the mirror is simulated—they are trying to fool Groucho or the viewer into thinking we see a mirror. Groucho by seeing himself copied, the viewer by thinking we see Lee's reflection. Then, Groucho has to look extra lively at the guy who is copying him, while Lee does not have to look at all; first he looked quizzical, but then he is not looking, merely facing, as a picture is taken—actually—behind his back. Lee is presumed to be looking, but is not.

With the Marx example, we look at someone trying to fool someone else—and then at the one being fooled—our point of view (pov), our sympathy or identification, shifts. With Lee, we look at the one being fooled, or are fooled into thinking we see someone fooled, as we ourselves are fooled by the photograph, which we think is a mirror, within a photograph. If we identify with the one looking into a mirror, then we ourselves are part of a larger representation—that queasy feeling of being looked at. Lee's photograph makes us aware we are being looked at when we take a Selfie—but not looked at by ourselves, rather by the big Other.

How does Lee's trick work? By our thinking we see him looking into the mirror (he is looking at a photograph of himself), and by our being fooled into thinking he is narcissistic—*but really he is dialectical, reflexive*.[11] Dialectics in two senses: looking at Lee's work, we have to both see and not see the image as mirror/photograph; and Lee's work with/without Groucho Marx's. Accomplished via the technology of photography, of its print as a large format (like Jeff Wall, Lee is based in Vancouver), of his own unremarkable (Asianized) body in "normcore" garb, and all of that, that trickery, itself a form of a "remake" of a Hollywood comedy. And thus it engages in a temporality both internal and external: the latter in the sense of reaching back to an earlier artwork (just as Ashbery's poem did), the former in terms of Lee's picture's making. In the first photograph, which we initially "think" is a mirror, Lee looks quizzical, puzzled—he is getting ready to be surprised.

What the Selfie allows, then, is a way to rescue Lacan's mirror stage from the moralism of the narcissistic charge. Jodi Dean makes a similar argument, blogging that by taking pictures of ourselves, and then uploading them, we are participating in a collective project. The point, for Dean, is that the Selfie is *not* individualistic:

> Multiple images of the same form, the selfie form, stream across our screens, like the people we might pass walking along a sidewalk or in a mall. When we upload selfies, we are always vaguely aware that someone, when it is least opportune, may take an image out of its context and use

> it to our disadvantage. But we make them anyway as part of a larger social practice that says a selfie isn't really of me; it's not about me as the subject of a photograph. It's my imitation of others and our imitation of each other.[12]

Geoffrey Batchen anticipated Dean's analysis statement when he remarked in 2010 that the Selfie "represents the shift of the photograph serving as a memorial function to a communication device."[13] These three positions must in turn be unpacked (or Selfied): the Selfie as symptom of the narcissism of (social) media, the celebration of the Selfie, and the Selfie as indication of the dialectical reflexivity of media. The Selfie is a form of speculation: aesthetic-intellectual, but also financial.

One can, and should, however, bring an aesthetic approach to the Selfie and think about such common features of the genre as foreshortening from the classic Selfie to the possibilities via the Selfie stick, to the creepy eye effects.[14] But of course the problem immediately is we regress to an ahistorical formalism, for we find the same characteristics in Parmigianino, as John Ashbery reminds us: "the right hand/Bigger than the head," and "There is no way/To build it flat like a Section of wall." These are all visual tropes, are all then trapped in the classic mode of Lacan's Imaginary (my through line here is that the Selfie helps us to understand that Freud's narcissism, and Lacan's Imaginary, are not only visual, but also have to do with the body, with touching).

I propose, then, to reread Freud's essay "On Narcissism" in a post-Selfie context.[15] Here we can see how he introduces the haptic swerve or swipe that is key to the Selfie practice: "who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it" (73) but perhaps never obtaining complete satisfaction (unless via the "fragile absolute" that is the smashed iPhone).[16] Freud connects this narcissism to a perversion that we must read in a strict Lacanian fashion, as the pervert who knows the Other's desire, who enacts or is that desire (the big Other that is the Internet's desire).[17] But Freud also, finally, lays out a strict economy of narcissism that can, I hope, shift that term ("narcissistic") from the moralizing with which it is often applied to contemporary social media and the Selfie.

We can see how this works when Freud distinguishes between two kinds of object choices, the anaclitic or attachment type, and the narcissistic type. (The first might turn out to be the digital device, then, along with such aspects of that device as its Wi-Fi signal.) He then admits that since we all begin with two sexual objects, ourselves and our caregiver, we all possess a primary narcissism (87–88). Too, Freud's discussion of the narcissistic type *par excellence*, the narcissistic woman, soon becomes a description of why we

love the narcissistic child or other types: their charm lies in their narcissism, in their self-containment, which, in a curious proto-LOLcats way, he includes "the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves with us, such as cats" (89). But, and here Freud is almost providing us with an early example of the "listicle" so predominant in social and online media today, when he switches from good German to a list of whom "A person may love":

(1) According to the narcissistic type:
  (a) what he himself is (i.e. himself)
  (b) what he himself was,
  (c) what he himself would like to be (90)

In form and content, then, this is very much a newsfeed or Facebook update (or Snapchat list). Such lists perform a series of related ideas or observations, like the bullet point list we fall into when taking notes or writing. That form—an instant, unconnected list—then is triangulated with, on the one hand, the social media listicle and, on the other, a breakdown such as provided here by Freud. And that form, in online media, then often becomes a slide show or gallery—the curated sequence of ten or twenty images—the Selfie or Instagram or Snapchat become narrative, the shift from the lyric Selfie to the epic PowerPoint.

What is narcissistic about the list; how does such a pragmatic or online or Freudian list function in the Imaginary? This works in part because it is an image of text, or the text as image. Therefore, the text shifts from being read to being looked at (or also to being looked at). And the very form of the list, its serial nature, renders it susceptible to the narcissism of small differences. And this is then made meta or reflexive, for in our list it is a narcissism, in the sense that it lists whom the narcissist wants to love, and it is all variations of himself. *Freud's list is the prototype for every listicle ever*: what he was in the past (one's failures), what one is now (hysterical), what the future is (dread or triumph: that nonrelation). Like the Selfie, the listicle is an online narcissism *par excellence*.

When we turn, finally, to Lacan's talk on the mirror stage, we do find a curious repetition of Freud's haptic swerve (now that the haptic has been trumped by the Anthropocene) in Lacan's argument that the "eventually acquired control over the uselessness of the image, immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which" the child "adopt[s] a slightly leaning-forward position" a "libidinal dynamism" where "the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry that reverses it" results in "the spatial capture manifested by the mirror stage."[18] For Lacan, the spatial capture of the mirror stage, is akin to the Selfie in its haptic desire (here I think of the recent ad

for Crave TV, a streaming service, in which the hands of the viewers reach toward screens: *the screen is no longer watched, it is touched*). We are captured by the screen, our hands are tied—but if we touch instead of watching, is our gaze now haptic (and therefore, following Joan Copjec and Todd McGown, the haptic is an object).

Now we can add, to the tripartite Selfie theory (narcissism, commodification, and reflexivity), the touchiness of the Selfie, the touchscreen that is also, perhaps, paranoid, a little touchy.

The Cloud and the big Other

Can there be said to exist a digital big Other? How can we think about Lacan's theory of the symbolic register, also known as the big Other (*le grand Autre*), or even the great or large other in a digital framework? In order to understand Lacan's theory of the big Other, it is perhaps useful to trace how this figure emerges in Lacan's 1950s and 1960s texts, as a structural form of the father or master (but also, perhaps, the "paternal function," the paternal signifier).[19] Unlike the small other (our friend, neighbor, colleague), the big Other is invested with authority, be it formal or informal, written or unspoken. The big Other stands in for the law. We can understand this better, perhaps, if we think about how the psychotic reaction to the big Other (the psychotic's "foreclosure" or violent expulsion of the big Other from their world) and what that foreclosure tells us about the virtual or fragile nature of the big Other, which has in turn to do with its etiology. Lacan is clear and emphatic: "the essential point … is that the delusion began the moment the initiative came from the Other, with a capital O."[20] The symbolic prop of the big Other is what is denied by the psychotic, and because for the psychotic, the primal scene is all too present, that scene where the big Other intrudes into the Imaginary dyad of infant and caregiver. This intrusion may be due to the demands of work—civilization, Freud would say, capitalism, we may say now. Or even through one's own desires: the multifarious question of the desire of the other. The content does not matter—indeed, the very arbitrariness of the big Other at this stage ensures that the big Other will in the end be a structural proposition or function, but also points to its weakness, its fragility, or its virtuality.

That is, consider how the psychotic forecloses the big Other, refusing the necessity for an external authority, while remaining fascinated with that big Other, when the foreclosed returns as the voices that speaks to one. Such a condition of foreclosure persists, from the *Ur*-psychotic, Daniel Paul

Schreber, to wireless technology. Think of a common occurrence in modern life: we come across a person talking in an animated fashion, perhaps waving his arms, but no one else is around. Here the "stupid first impression" is that someone is talking to himself, is walking around gesticulating like a madman. But we correct that impression when we realize that, no, he is on his phone, he has that triangular thing hanging off his ear. He is using the Bluetooth technology. And then that second impression itself is corrected, and we go back to the first representation, which now includes wireless technology in the larger picture of daily life as madness. For in their foreclosure of the big Other, the psychotics were ahead of the curve: post 1960s, we have witnessed the decline of the big Other in the sense of these notions of symbolic arbitration—and the concomitant rise of the demand to enjoy. Like the Bluetooth user, we want to be connected all the time, interpellated by the digital, endlessly downloading, uploading, checking on our friends or family through social media.

So, "there is no big Other," or the theory of the virtuality of the big Other, holds, via the interpassive logic of *le sujet supposé* (the subject supposed to know, to believe, to enjoy, to desire), that the power of the big Other lies precisely in its supposition by others, by our believing that there is someone in charge.[21] But this notion of the "virtual" big Other also suggests two further problems. First, there could be a big Other of the digital world (an order, a system). Second, the virtuality of the big Other means we have to entertain the paradoxical possibility that while there is no big Other, there is a non–big Other, or a big Other that does not exist, and that big Other which does not exist is virtual. This latter proposition follows the logic of Lacan's formula of sexuation and its amendment by Žižek: there is no sexual relation (Lacan) and there *is* a nonrelation (Žižek).[22]

To summarize, then: (1) Is there a big Other of the digital world? (2) Is the big Other virtual or digital? In terms of this first question, if we answer in the affirmative—which we should, after all, because everywhere we go, in digital life, we are subject to big laws and small ones ("netiquette," as they used to call it, is an example of the latter)—if we answer "yes," then we are in the realm of a "multiculturalism" of the digital, as attested to by Virginia Heffernan's recent thesis of the democratic Web and the privatized smartphone.[23] But the relativist big Other means more than the unobjectionable argument that diasporic or migrant or ethnic communities will have their own systems of law and laws, and more, too, than simply extending this finding to class, gender, and other taste- and subcultures. For the plurality of big Others should not blind us to the "fact" that there is really only one big Other (and he doesn't exist): the big Other is structural, and thus relatively agnostic when it comes to content.

Let us turn then to our second proposition: the theory that the big Other is virtual. What does this mean? If there is no big Other, or there is a non–big Other, a virtual big Other, does this mean that in our post-Austerity present, of ever-accelerating download speeds, storage capacity, such a technological feature of the digital age constitute a formal "limit of no limits," or what in Lacanese is called the "demand to enjoy"? For our desire on our part to upload ever more photographs, to send more texts, to add more comments is precisely what is called into being by the digital panopticon, a crowd-sourced NSA, and perhaps the most concrete example of such digital abstraction is the Cloud. By this, I mean today's "cloud computing," in which digital storage and program software are not part of one's own computer or digital device, but are instead somewhere else, "in the Cloud," as the vernacular has it. So one's Facebook photographs (and status updates), but also programs with which to organize projects (from the smallest, personal, efforts to large corporate accounting and HR programs) are, again, somewhere else (so a matter of space and location). In the Cloud, but what or where is the Cloud, and why is this gaseous metaphor used to describe—what? The actual servers on which such data and programs are stored? The ideology of placelessness, of speed, mobility, and ethereal access (from anywhere to anywhere)? Which is to say, that the Cloud is the big Other?[24]

In his book *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet*, architectural critic Andrew Blum investigates the thingness of the Internet, from cables crossing oceans to data exchanges; toward the end of his book he looks at "where your data sleeps," or the big data centers operated by Microsoft, Google, and the like. In Blum's usage, "the Cloud" refers to the network of data centers (and he takes us to one, in The Dalles, Ore.). But the Cloud is also an obfuscation: "web-based companies in particular seem to enjoy hiding within 'the cloud' … generally speaking, the cloud asks us to believe that our data is an abstraction, not a physical reality."[25] Further, he argues, such "feigned obscurity becomes a malignant advantage of the cloud, a condescending purr of 'we'll take care of that for you' that in its plea for our ignorance reminds me of the slaughterhouse."[26] Blum's suspicions are borne out by his farcical tour of the Google server farm in The Dalles, where he essentially gets to walk around the parking lots, is not told the purpose of any buildings, and ends up having lunch with a group of noncommunicative employees. "Google's first rule of data center PR was: don't go in the data center."[27] If the Cloud is the Internet's big Other, then it does not exist, not in the sense that since Google does not want us to see the insides of their servers it therefore does not exist, but because the Cloud is an antinomy, both the servers *and* their denial.

Benjamin Bratton explores this conundrum further in *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, where, drawing on Carl Schmitt, he argues that a

post-Westphalian system of governance, or *nomos*, characterizes the Cloud. And bringing together Blum's terms, Bratton argues that "it is the physicality of abstraction that is at the center of things" and, further, that there is a bloody settler colonialism at the heart or origin of the very forces of abstraction that make possible the contemporary world of planetary computerization.[28] While Bratton is making gargantuan leaps here, moving from the ancient historical moments foundational for Heidegger, Derrida, and Schmitt to present-day computer networks, his switching back and forth between the abstract and the material is worth our attention.

> It should be said that for Schmitt, if not for Heidegger, it is the physical taking and defense of land that matters the most, not the transgenerational claims of autochthonous bloodlines that may have lost out against new forces. These political conundrums are still on our plates, and the ecological absolutes staring back at us are based not in the simple honor of defending homelands, but in *the physicalization of abstraction and the abstraction of physicalization*. The Cloud is not virtual; it is physical even if it is not always "on the ground," even when it is deep underground. There is nothing immaterial about massless information that demands such energy from the Earth.[29]

The *nomos* of the Cloud then is its weight—like Santner's theory of the flesh, the Cloud has weight. For Bratton, such qualities of the Cloud foreclose any kind of irredentism, or the desire for a return to (or of) some prelapsarian authenticity. Herein lies the conundrum: we actually want the Cloud to be simply virtual, not only because such emptiness allows us to maintain the fiction of "there's no big Other" (there are no rules, let's have fun) but also because it is a way to avoid thinking about the "massless information that demands such energy from the Earth." *But the opposite is also true.* It's odd, is it not, how the most knotted logic of post-Lacanian thinking gets close to negative dialectics? For if we think of, or dwell on, or fetishize, that very "weight" of massless information, its carbon footprint if you will (guilt trips about e-waste and the like), then we are not so much thinking dialectically of the non–big Other, but rather we are stuck on, simply, the big Other. Otherwise we risk short-circuiting the path from "there is no big Other" to "there is a non-big Other."

The weight of the Cloud, which is also its materiality, then is what I propose we can think about thanks to John Gerrard's important work *Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma) 2015*.

In this digital simulation, Gerrard depicts a Google server farm, combining 2,500 photographs taken from a helicopter. Gerrard was in a helicopter because the Google corporation, which has as its mission "to organize the

Figure 7.2 John Gerrard, Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma) at Thomas Dane Gallery, 2014.

world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," would not grant him permission to photograph the building's exterior (more recently, images of a server building's interior, all glittering and hi-tech, have become widely available including through a 360° view).

In one way, Gerrard's work tests the thesis that there is no big Other/the big Other is virtual. If we start with the proposition of the Cloud as a bit of digital jargon/marketing hype that denotes distributed computing and remote data centers, its very nomenclature reminds us that our data or programs are weightless or virtual (even while this global industry is now big enough to consume more energy than the airlines).[30] Indeed, the originator of the term, computer scientist David Gelernter, originally meant it as a figure of a cloud's shadow over a tile surface.[31]

So, if we start with the thesis that the Cloud does not exist (is virtual), we then have Gerrard's art, which makes the proposition that it does in fact exist (also Blum and Bratton's thesis)—for here we have but one of the thousands of server complexes around the world. That artwork then makes the argument that this very materiality, or thingness, of the server is its undoing—because the very way in which the "simulation" is made obviates either realism, or photography (or it adds another layer/stack to those aesthetics or medium). Gerrard puts it this way: "the Internet doesn't *not* exist. It's physical" and then, tellingly, "I became interested in what the Internet looks like." And so

he resists Kubrick-like dolly shots down cool curves of blinking machines and films the buildings' exteriors. But Gerrard's syntax is important: saying "the internet doesn't *not* exist" is different from saying "the internet exists." By going through the idea that the Internet does not exist before arriving at its negation, Gerrard avoids the same short-circuit identified above, in the path from "there is no big Other" to "there is a non-big Other." Without considering that the Internet could *not* exist, our thinking would short-circuit and would avoid the hard work of switching from an argument to its opposite and back again. And yet, how do you take a picture of something, the Internet, which doesn't *not* exist? How do you represent the dialectics of the non–big Other?

And so, what do Gerrard's images show us, what do they tell us? Nothing. As our pov slowly moves around the building, we see pipes, edges, the blue prairie sky. Grass, low-slung buildings, lights. Nothing—and that is the point.

The nothing that we see, the nothing that is the server farm as well as its simulation (which is the medium in which Gerrard labels his work) we can think about in the following way, best illustrated by this semiotic rectangle:[32]

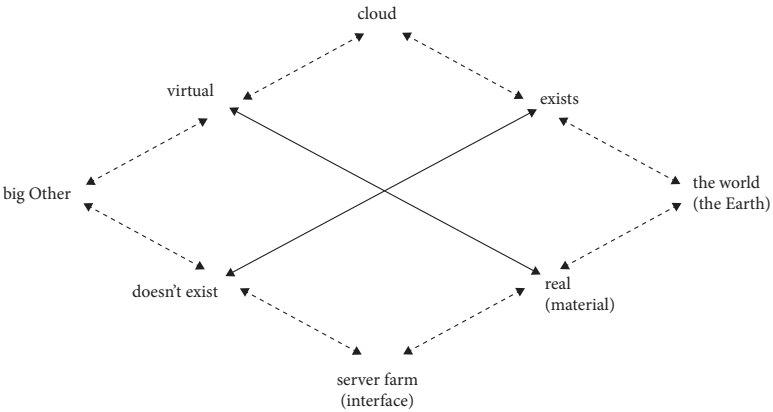

Figure 7.3 Semiotic Rectangle (the Cloud and the big Other).

I am calling on Gerrard's art to do a lot of work here, evidently: to make an argument about the status of the big Other, about the digital infrastructure, and about the relationship between art, the digital, and Lacanian theory. First of all, *Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma) 2015* posits an antinomy between what is virtual and what exists. Virtual reality, or the simulation, or even virtual in the vernacular sense of "almost"—all of these concepts are brought to mind by

this artwork. Presumably, what is virtual both does and does not exist—a VR landscape or figure does not exist in the way that an actual landscape or person does, and yet of course it does exist as code, and it also exists in a way similar to how other representations exist. Further, existing in the Cloud, it is part of the infrastructure of our obscene demands for instant connectivity. These terms ("virtual" and "exist") thus generate their own negations or oppositions: what is real or material on the one hand and what does not exist on the other. Each antinomy, then paired, is illustrated by what Gerrard's artwork makes it possible to conceptualize. The Cloud, then, is both virtual (data stored on the Cloud may not be weightless, but it certainly takes up much less space than conventional books, archives, and the like) and yet also exists (the Cloud is there, we can find it, look at it, perhaps even touch it). What exists, and is also real, or material, is the world, by which we mean not the Heideggerian world (or Worlding) but the Earth, the planet. Gerrard's artwork is part of the *Grow Finish Unit* series, which focuses on "architecturally similar, computer-controlled pork production units in the Midwestern USA."[33] The server farm is what is both real and yet does not exist. Why is this so? Lacan's theory helps us to think in such structuralist and yet also Hegelian modalities of negation, paradox, and contradiction. The server farm does not exist in the sense that, with Gerrard's work, we do not—cannot—see the farm, but instead its simulation.[34] We can only see the simulation for legal reasons (Google forbids photography) that are also ethical or political: the server farm, like pork production or slaughterhouses, are spaces we wish not to look into too closely, we do not want to think about them, we disavow them. And yet, of course, the server farm is real, or material: it is made up of building materials, and, as Bratton reminds us, the Cloud is nothing if not "massless information that demands such energy from the Earth."[35] The server farm is in a way an interface between the Cloud and the Earth. We complete our turn around the semiotic rectangle with a return to Lacan, to the big Other, which is both virtual and does not exist. So now we have a tautology or redundancy, but one that we are ready for. The big Other is virtual in the sense that it is digital, or cybernetic; and it does not exist in the sense that there is no rational order dictated by it, no right way of doing things.

The Selfie and the Cloud: Antinomy, dialectics, lack

Can we speak of a dialectic of the lack? Or, to reverse the question, of a lacking dialectic? In some ways, the Selfie and the Cloud (which map in a Hegelian way onto the Subject and *Geist*) relate to each other as a dialectic,

first because they are fundamentally abstractions. And the Cloud is also a meta-abstraction, an abstraction—an *idea*—of the abstraction that is data. This is to bring out or stress the Hegelian side of Lacan's thought, which, via articulations by Rebecca Comay and Fredric Jameson, has been in turn related to Adorno and the (negative) dialectic.[36] To say that there is a dialectic of the lack is different from saying that there is a lacking dialectic. The first denotes how the terms or concepts—the "Selfie" and the "Cloud"—are related to each other: in a relation of antagonism, causality, and connection and disconnection (or the positive *and* the negative, which would be more of a Hegelian dialectic rather than an Adornian one). They are related to each other in terms of lack, a mutually constitutive (or immanent) lack. The Cloud needs its Selfie, its subject. What is the Cloud without the Selfie, without data? An empty server, an empty set? No, the Cloud (the king with two bodies—the Internet has two bodies) lacks the Selfie *qua* content.[37] But the Selfie also needs the Cloud—to connect—and for the social. Selfies lack the Cloud in the sense that a Selfie without the Cloud is merely old tech, a photograph, an image (not a networked image): not just analogue, but un-networked.

But what if the dialectic itself lacks, if the mechanism or technique or methodology here—the dialectic qua connectivity that also disconnects—itself lacks? Is this then a lack of lack, along the same lines of a negation of negation? (Lacanian theory forbids such doubling: there is no metalanguage, there is no other of the big Other.) Is the lack in the dialectic—to return to digital examples—those instances where we get no signal, no bars of Wi-Fi, airplane mode? Or is lack *of* connectivity different from the constitutive or immanent lack of the dialectic? (For we only need "airplane mode" when we ourselves are connecting, are making airline connections, are moving our bodies.)

I am discussing the Selfie and the Cloud at fairly developed levels of abstraction here: the Selfie as subject but also referring metonymically to any kind of content for online or networked communication, such as emails, tweets, status updates, or self-portraits. Moreover, the Cloud is not simply the servers, that network, the computers, but also, perhaps, thinking itself, solipsistic thinking conceived of as social in some ways (the "hive mind" may capture this paradox). But the lack that is immanent to the Cloud or the Selfie is not only mutually implicated—each abstraction or concept also lacks constitutively. The Cloud, for instance, can be divided between its storage capacity—what is called, both in psychoanalysis and in cybernetics, "memory"—and its processing facility—which may be what in theory or in philosophy is called "thinking." But memory also has speed. So, the one is size, the other speed, which are neoliberal metrics for a different kind of capacity, a capacity which must be "built" but also "sustainable." (Which also leads us to ask not, *à la* Heidegger, "what is called thinking?",

but "what is the energy used for thinking?") The dialectic of the Cloud, this nonidentity with itself, along with other immanent contradictions such as between its material basis and its ideal content, then is matched by the dialectic of the Selfie, which is signaled perhaps by the nomenclature, by the "ie" at the end of the "Self." Like other suffixes of contemporary demotic—the "ie" in "bestie" (for best friend), the—ish of *blackish*, or the "y" added to many words—the "ie" here in Selfie is about connotation or the spread of meaning. It is also a quiddity: the Selfie is both the networked self-portrait *and* the lack of the other. Here a common, everyday critique of the Selfie—that the picture's distorted foreshortening or "selfie arm" denotes the subject's pathetic solitude—contains a grain of truth. The lack, that is, of another person to take the Selfie: the Selfie denotes a lack of the social (which then is remedied with the Cloud). The Cloud and the Selfie lack each other and, in turn, lack themselves. The Selfie cannot be a Selfie without the Cloud, just by itself, and the Cloud, of course, is the constitutive antagonism or lack of the Selfie. The Selfie is social (or, as Jodi Dean calls it, communistic).

This, then, is by way of a conclusion, to bring the Selfie and the Cloud into a dialectics of lack. The Selfie, caught up in the mirror of dualisms, of self and other, then encounters a third term: the "Cloud." But is this to speak of an antagonism, of a synthesis, of a positive dialectic or a negative one (the former Hegelian, the latter Adornoesque or Žižekian)? What, first of all, would be a Cloud of the Selfie, what is the Cloud of Kim Kardashian, of Tim Lee, of Parmagianino or Ashbery? In some ways that question is its own answer, surely: the plethora of examples and discourses (from social media celebrity to contemporary art, from Old Masters to American poetry) are themselves a Cloud, a word cloud, a collective of hashtags. This is not to homogenize their differences (as Jameson remarks with respect to Lacan and the dialectic, what is genuinely radical about that body of work is how it allows what is incommensurable to lie as it is, without forcing it into a similarity that cannot but help leave a remainder). Thus, to use one of Jameson's examples, the role of Marx and Freud in Lacan's theory is never ironed out or made symmetrical, and indeed the shifting valences of the big Other, too, which becomes, at different times, he argues, "both language and society, both the Symbolic and the social."[38]

Then, what is the Selfie of the Cloud? Is that what Gerrard's project proposes—the helicopter-derived photography as a virtual (that word again!) Selfie stick? Does, then, that project bring back, under the guise of a video game–worked collection of images *qua* simulation, the totality, the One, indeed the Cloud as Master (or big Other)? Instead of data sets (or even data), we have the datum. One bit of knowledge, which stands in for or replaces, all the others. The unconscious as data set, or the other way around.

Conclusion

The digital, I declared at the beginning of this book, is a totality. But a totality fractured by antagonisms—between our neoliberal devices and some larger sociality—a sociality that, in turn, is riven with all the old malevolences of the neighbor, the Twitter follower or troll. And yet also a totality—an absolute—that is fundamentally fragile, not only in the everyday sense that phones break (or are jailbroken), but also that there is a lack in the digital, no big Other, there is no Big Data—and yet there is a nonrelation, there is a virtual big Other. In this chapter I want to bring together some of these ideas of digital psychoanalysis (or the Žižekian digital) with the most abstract—but also concrete—of methods. First, then, to think about how Žižek conceives of dialectics, by way of contrast with that of Fredric Jameson: bringing these old fellow-travelers into some kind of dialogue, perhaps. But then to work that logic out with two sets of cultural examples: the visual art of Hito Steyerl and Dara Birnbaum, both of whom work in video, and the popular Hollywood film *Ex Machina* (often discussed in tandem with *Her*). These cultural texts urge us to think about the status of the big Other (and also the gaze), which helps when I turn to the recent work of Walter Benn Michaels, who, I argue, in his finely wrought critiques of multiculturalism (plot spoiler: capitalism loves diversity), nonetheless fails to move from "there is no big Other" to "there is a virtual big Other." Returning, finally, to another Hollywood film discussed earlier in this book, *This Is Forty*, I conclude with the argument that the Internet is not unlike the toilet (although which is more disgusting is up to the reader to determine).

Žižek avec Jameson

In my recent book on Fredric Jameson, I averred that while Jameson and Žižek seem to be ideologically aligned, a misperception suggested or affirmed by their frequent citation of each other's work, these citations were, I argued, "a screen that obfuscates more profound differences" (*JWWS*, 10–11). But what *are* those differences? As a way of continuing the discussion of labor

and dialectics from the *Her* and Selfie/Cloud chapters in this book, I propose here to lay some stress on what I take to be some important differences between those two projects, hoping against hope that such an effort will not only (or also) tell us something about Žižek's dialectics, but also about how we can think dialectically about the digital.

Consider, for example, Jameson's assertion in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* that Alexander Sokurov's *Days of Eclipse* (1988), via its imaginary resolution of a real contradiction—that between magic realism and the Soviet new wave—manages to bring together two genres: the fiction feature and the documentary. Musing, in a footnote, that footage in the film appears to have been lifted from an abandoned documentary film about Turkestan, Jameson opines: "*Eclipse* thereby not merely unites two distinct generic aspects of his extraordinary talent—the narrative-fictional and the observational—but also dialectically allows one to batten off the other: the fairy tale drawing unexpected new strength from this *ciné-verité* and vice versa."[1] Now, formally, one does not even have to reach for Žižekian antagonisms (Adorno's negative dialectic will do in a pinch) to see how far from Žižek's dialectics lie Jameson's notion, here at least, of two formal or generic tendencies in a film strengthening each other, rather than, say, positing an absolute difference. Here we might remember, as well, Jameson's slogan from the 1980s: difference relates.

Such a difference that relates can be seen if we consider the most recent Žižek/Jameson collaboration, the latter's essay *An American Utopia* and the collection of essays in response, edited by Žižek. One can like the flights of fancy that Jameson is given to in the essay (which go all the way back not only to the riff on San Francisco in the "The Existence of Italy" chapter in *Signatures of the Visible* but also can be found in *Marxism and Form*) without neglecting the important insight that in many ways, the details notwithstanding, Jameson's essay here is an attempt to bring together the secular and theological Utopias he has been mapping since he began writing on Bloch. But that "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" is where Jameson's dialectic can stall. Consider how, in *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson, commenting on Brecht's quip that in Hollywood, heaven serves "the prosperous, unsuccessful/As hell," adds, "A true dialectic; a true unity of opposites!"[2] No statement could be more un-Žižekian, and even perhaps un-Adornoan in its insistence on that "true unity," were it not for what Jameson immediately asks: "Will it be possible to untangle the negative from the positive?"[3] This figure, of untangling immediately, seems more psychoanalytic—for which, by way of further illustration, we can turn to Jeff Wall's lightbox photograph *Untangling* (1994). In that photograph, a man sits in a workshop or basement of some kind, in the midst of untangling

a giant knot of thick ropes. The task is Sisyphean to be sure—it is, again, a form of labor captured by the photographer. And it also suggests the work of psychoanalysis [thus Freud: it is from the latent content, "and not the dream's manifest content, that we disentangle its meaning" (*SE* **4,** 277].

Whether Jameson's "untangling" of the negative and the positive is a matter of a unity of opposites, we can certainly contrast Žižek's method which, remarkably, insists on fetishizing the antagonism *qua* unbreachable gap. And so Jameson brings to our attention the "perversity" with which Žižek stages a "stupid first impression" to be followed not only by its dialectical opposite, but then a further, paradoxical, return to that stupid first impression "accompanied by a new knowledge of the errors involved in the second moment" (*Valences*, 58). Consider, as a working through of this logic, my comments in the Selfie and Cloud chapter on psychosis, on how the psychotic forecloses the big Other, refusing the necessity for an external authority, while remaining fascinated with that big Other, when the foreclosed returns as the voices that speaks to one—a condition that remains, from the *Ur*-psychotic, Daniel Paul Schreber, to today's Bluetooth users. Here the "stupid first impression" is that someone is talking to himself, is walking around gesticulating like a madman. But we correct that impression when we realize that, no, he is on his phone, he has that triangular thing hanging off his ear. He is using the Bluetooth technology. And then that second impression itself is corrected, and we go back to the first representation, which now includes wireless technology in the larger picture of daily life as madness.

And so there lies in Žižek the danger of fetishizing or romanticizing negativity, as we see in the discussion of the mysterious signifier "Moor eefoc" in *Disparities*. The phrase arises in a passage from G.K. Chesterton, where he discusses how Dickens would sit in a coffee room, spy the name of the shop backward on the glass window (*Disparities*, 186). The difference between "Coffee Room" and "Moor Eeffoc" is absolute, the latter denoting "a direct signifier" of *jouissance,* Žižek claims, but also "a point at which all meaning breaks down." And yet is the gap so wide, so untenable? Couldn't a Moor Eeffoc be a perfectly plausible name for a creature in an H.P. Lovecraft story?

I want to return for a moment with the content of antagonism on film of a moment ago—remembering Žižek's commentary, in *The Fright of Real Tears*, on Kieślowski's turn from documentary making to the feature because of his aversion to intruding on intimate moments.[4] As Kieślowski tells the story: "I'm frightened of real tears. In fact, I don't even know whether I've got the right to photograph them. At such times I feel like somebody who's found himself in a realm which is, in fact, out of bounds. That's the main reason why I escaped from documentaries" (*FRT*, 72). For Žižek, as an orthodox

Lacanian, the Real can only be conveyed via fiction, but not a realistic fiction: "We are watching on screen a simple documentary shot in which, all of a sudden, the entire fantasmatic depth reverberates. We are shown what 'really happened', and suddenly, we perceive this reality in all its fragility, as one of the contingent outcomes, forever haunted by its shadowy doubles" (*FRT*, 77). This surely is the uncanny feeling we have, watching *Searching for Sugar Man*, when we wonder if all pop music fandom is simply assembled for a stock documentary footage. Or, to paraphrase Žižek's comment on Hegel and Thucydides ("the Peloponnesian War took place so Thucydides could write a book on it" *LtN*, 472), the antiapartheid struggle took place in South Africa so Rodriguez's fans could enjoy his music.

A few summers ago, visiting Berlin, I was staying in Kreuzberg and went out one night looking for a movie. After Googling "English language movies in Berlin," I was directed to a nearby cinema—walking through the driving rain, and following a tiny sandwich board on the street, I walked to the back of a courtyard, up two or three flights, into a bar adjoining two or three small cinemas, the Kino Babylon (I saw the Tom Hardy one-hander *Locke*). Waiting in the lounge for the film to start, I noticed the bartender setting up a projector. Responding to my inquiry, he told me that the cinema played *Searching for Sugar Man* every Wednesday, and had been doing so for over a year. I told him it must be nice to hear the music, Rodriguez is great. "I hate that soundtrack," he said in a flat, uninflected, German-English voice.

This search for a lost object (and the concomitant disgust with what one already has) is also the subject of Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film, *Stalker*. That film was based, like *Days of Eclipse*, on a novel by the Soviet SF brothers Strugatsky, and Jameson also discusses *Stalker* in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. Again, Jameson is concerned with generic or art boundaries: those between high art and Hollywood, or the Soviet tradition and the West. To these we might add our theme in the present volume, one worked out below in *Ex Machina*: the digital and the actual. Jameson argues that it is "illegitimate" to cross the line that separates SF and art, that separates Philip K. Dick or Stanislaw Lem from Kafka, "because of the implied intent to endow a paraliterary or subcultural genre with the legitimacies of high literature and high art proper, legitimacies that in any case many of us no longer recognize" (90). Like comics that yearn for the aura of art, or gay marriage, the SF text that desires cultural capital seeks to board a sinking ship.

But even if we agree with such boundaries (or with their actuality that only becomes evident, perversely, when they are crossed and/or disavowed), how does the digital/actual boundary compare? And are boundaries a matter of borders or are they a matter of dialectics? Here the only solution, it appears, is

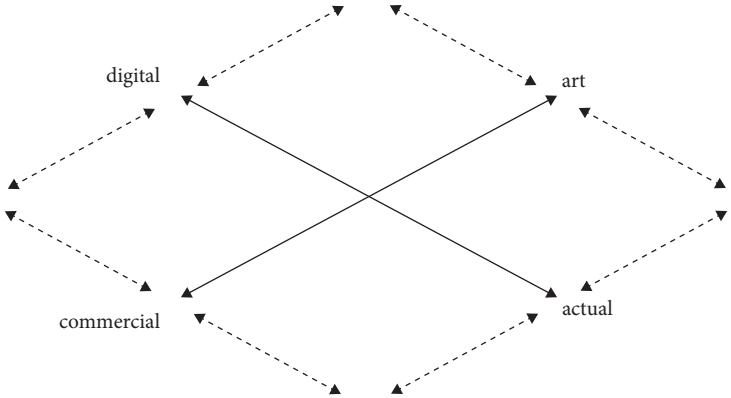

Figure C.1 Semiotic Rectangle (the Digital and Art).

to consider these oppositions (or antinomies, or dialectics) with each other, that is, to rejig the semiotic rectangle from our previous chapter thus:

This may be an overhasty recourse to Greimas, but it will, I hope, make sense momentarily. Because it seems self-evident that the digital, and art, are hardly antinomies or opposed to each other—there is a lot of digital art around these days (a few years ago it called itself post-Internet art). But this is precisely the nut to crack: What is the relation of the digital to art? Here Jameson's comments on Sokurov (and Žižek's on Tarkovsky) are relevant. *Days of Eclipse* was filmed with a sickly yellow filter, Jameson notes: "this seems to be a Soviet innovation and a significant formal response to the image culture of postmodernism itself, in a situation in which the return to black-and-white photography is the impossible Utopia of the lost object of desire" (97).[5] This reminds one of at least two or three "lost objects" for film proper: first of all the silent era, lost when talkies began, then black and white, lost with the advent of color, and now film itself, lost with digital projection (hence the American *auteurs*, Scorsese and Tarantino especially, will campaign for and use film). The effect of the digital in film is a recap of those two previous ruptures, the first of which was an ontological shift (from a visual, but silent, medium, to one that was both visual and aural), the second an "aesthetic" shift (the quality of the image, of the visual or Imaginary). The digital revolution for film is both ontological and aesthetic, but it is primarily, I would argue, one to do with the viewing experience (we all watch films on our laptops). The advent of the digital has different valences, it seems, in different art forms. In music, and especially in popular music, the digital was a matter of both production (since ProTools, it seems that actual music studios, my musician friends

tell me, can be rented dirt-cheap) and, crucially, distribution (which is to say that no one cares if the MP3 is a shittier quality: what matters is how eminently downloadable it is), with disastrous effects on an industry that had hitched its wagon to the commodity form of the LP. Then, in visual art, the digital has hastened or repeated the turn to the dematerialized art object well documented (if not veritably theorized into being) by Lucy Lippard in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with all the first-time tragedy, second-time farce, rhythm we know so well. That this digital dematerialization matches, in a kind of neoliberal lockstep, the gentrification of Western urban centers (rising property values and rents thereby making the artist's spacious studio a relic of modernism) means that such Hito Steyerl's theorization of the "poor image" reverses the tragedy/farce narrative: Steyerl is the tragic rejoinder to Lippard's farcical belief in conceptualism (more on Steyerl below). Too, in literature, while the digital had for the longest time the greatest effect on production—from the word processor to the labor of publishing that John Thompson describes so well in *The Merchants of Culture*—the (belated) dematerialization of the book, that fetish object for 500 years of humanism, may be its greatest gift (from the Internet to book piracy being merely epiphenomenal). These valences of digitization are both different and similar in how they reveal the specificities of each art form's *objet petit a*. What is the *objet petit a* of film as revealed by the digital? Surely the Imaginary itself *qua* object, the visual field: whether we think of Bazinian realism (the claim of cinema to accurately represent the visual), documentary as genre, the apparently monolithic quality of the visual (challenged by the talkie), or the triumph of 3-D (twice: both in the 1950s and more recently since *Avatar*). The *objet a* of music is, similarly, aural fidelity, but also, perhaps the tactile nature of a certain decade or so of music listening—the LP, the gatefold, the golden era of album art (hence the recent fetish for vinyl as a minority taste). Too, with literature, it is the book qua object we are starting to miss, even before it is gone.

But perhaps this is to focus needlessly on the formal or content bases of the artworks, ignoring not only production but also conditions of reception, distribution, and the production (again) of meaning in those last circuits. Here we enter into the terrain of the popular (which should probably replace "commercial" as the opposite of art in the diagram just now). Fan culture, crowdsourcing, the neoliberal subjectivity of wikinomics, the prosumer, the mob, the crowd, the collective: to wit, the "sociality" in social media. Or, in a more foreboding sense: populism (thus, Donald Trump could be seen not merely as the chickens coming home to roost of US elites' marginalization of class, but also as that accomplished via the circuits of social media). Here a cultural example can serve as a bridge to considerations of how

Žižek and Jameson have theorized contemporary collectivities (*qua* lost object) read as a turn to the digital. But this will also allow us to think about how the "search for a lost object (and the concomitant disgust with what one already has)" can not only describe digital effects but the more global notion that the digital may stand in, for the intellectual, as a trace or lost object of the popular, which is to say, the working class, thus returning us to the discussion of class so hastily concluded above with respect to the Lacanian gaze.

Wonder Woman, less wonderful technology

Dana Birnbaum's 1978–1979 video *Technology Transformation/Wonder Woman* can stand as a limit case for the status of the artwork in the digital epoch. Stephanie Rebick describes the laborious process by which Birnbaum made the work; her description is worth quoting at length to give us a sense of the historical and technological dimensions of Birnbaum's artwork and the ensuing decades:

> With *Technology Transformation/Wonder Woman,* Birnbaum reconstructs appropriated footage from the 1970s television show *Wonder Woman* into a dizzying sequence of fast-paced shots that feature the use of special effects—the liminal moments when protagonist Diana Prince transforms from a dull secretary into a sexy superhero. Disrupting the conventional narrative progression of the time-based medium, Birnbaum refashions the episode into a symphony of pulsating beats, flashing lights, and perpetual motion. In this "supercut" of Season Three's "Disco Devil," Birnbaum reduces the action to a series of fiery explosions, syncopated spins and seemingly fruitless running. When she created the work in the late 1970s, home recording devices, like the Betamax and the VCR, were not readily available and Birnbaum was forced to either shoot the television screen … or get small production houses with tuners to tape and edit the broadcast based on her instructions, making her gesture all the more radical. She also bypassed the conventional display of art in a gallery context to reach a more diverse audience, opting instead to screen *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* in a variety of unconventional sites including on cable television and in the window of a chic Soho salon (H Hair Salon de Coiffure, with the soundtrack spilling out into the street), as well as in popular nightclubs. (Palladium, Mudd Club and Danceteria)[6]

The title of Rebick's short essay on Birnbaum's art, "The Invention of the Supercut," attributing as it does a 1970s originary moment to a form that would only come to be practiced forty years later, should alert us to some of the unique historical questions that are raised by digital art practices and their interpretation. For instance, what is this gesture, and how is it all the more radical, as Rebick claims? Possibly because *it is more difficult*, more difficult to do (with all the laborious details Rebick outlines) but also more difficult to think of, to conceive of or conceptualize. The radicality of video appropriation, then, is connected to the simultaneous clumsy steps and epiphanic moments of conception (which is to say, production); perhaps also it is a matter of how people watch the finished product (circulation—and here we always will have a melancholic note sounded, since we are unable to recuperate that glorious late 1970s moment of watching video art in NYC discos); or is it, finally, a matter of reception, of how one interprets, canonizes, dismisses, recuperates, or mimics (this last perhaps *without being conscious*—hence today's "supercuts" *qua* social media popular practice find their unknown point of origin in early video appropriation art).

The problem, as Rebick's anachronistic term "supercut" indicates, is that such artistic labor is a very different matter in the digital age. But this is not simply because the proliferation of the technology for downloading and editing television or movies make such cuts a much easier affair (which is to say, following the above distinction, production), or that they are embarrassingly abundant on the Internet (according to one source, the first supercut, made up entirely of a scene of a detective removing his sunglasses from the TV show *CSI: Miami*, was online within a year of YouTube itself: which is to say, circulation). We seem, then, to have a new antinomy: on the one hand, a plethora of present-day versions of a venerable avant-garde strategy; on the other hand, the lack or decline of that avant-garde itself.

This problem is the great theme of Hito Steyerl's work. In a well-known essay on the "poor image," Steyerl traces the conundrum for contemporary video and film art, where degraded copies circulate online, in a Pirate Bay version of earlier generations' artist collectives: "Blurred AVI files of half-forgotten masterpieces are exchanged on semi-secret P2P platforms. Clandestine cell phone videos smuggled out of museums are broadcast on YouTube. DVDs of artists' viewing copies are bartered. Many works of avant-garde, essayistic, and noncommercial cinema have been resurrected as poor images. Whether they like it or not." These "poor images" Steyerl connects on the one hand to the legacy of punk, lo-fi, and "imperfect cinema," and on the other to a differential value based on "velocity, intensity, and spread."[7] The "poor image," Steyerl writes,

> operates against the fetish value of high resolution. On the one hand, this is precisely why it also ends up being perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings. … But, simultaneously, a paradoxical reversal happens. The circulation of poor images creates a circuit, which fulfills the original ambitions of militant and (some) essayistic and experimental cinema—to create an alternative economy of images, an imperfect cinema existing inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams. (42)

Steyerl may seem to be making the usual complaints about millennials and digital natives, with their short attention spans and predilection for YouTube, but consider her argument in sync with Birnbaum's practice, which also hinges, fatally, on the relation between an avant-garde and the popular. Steyerl finds in the circulation of the poor image today (and she does not stay with only the sacred milieu of the leftist intellectual, or even the bedeviled relation of the first world and third world) what we may call an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction: the problem of the intellectual (or artist) in the digital epoch.

For Steyerl's works tend to be meandering, semiautobiographical film or video essays that turn on the figurative and representational folds of their own making, from Kurdish revolutionaries inspired by cinema posters, to her own (apocryphal?) career as an S&M actress, to a hedge fund manager-turned-mixed martial arts athlete.[8] Most profoundly, Steyerl's works connect diasporic subjectivities (a Turkish filmgoer in Germany, her own German-Japanese heritage, a Vietnamese-American) to the interest announced in her essay on the circulation of images, from film posters and Spiderman cartoons to bubbles of text messages and weather forecasts that predict "huge quantities of data … raining down from their cloud storage over Scandinavia."[9] Steyerl describes her aesthetics as "circulationism," or a state that is "not about the art of making an image, but about post-producing, launching, and accelerating it."[10]

How does this differ from Birnbaum's practice? This is the wrong question: the real question is how do these artistic practices, separated by three or four decades, differ in their treatment of the gap between popular culture and art. Now, for most artists, popular culture when it becomes the material for their practice, is no different from a political history (say, for Brecht), or one's autobiography, or the classics. Thus, first, we can compare Steyerl's sneer at "compressed attention spans" to Rebick's description of how Birnbaum "reduces the action to a series": on the one hand, this compression or reduction is surely analogous to the condensation and displacement

that is so signal a feature of the Freudian unconscious. In which case the popular is akin to the dreaming subject's "remains of the day." And, then, consider how "Birnbaum was forced to either shoot the television screen … or get small production houses with tuners to tape and edit the broadcast based on her instructions." Birnbaum *was forced to*—by whom? *Shoot* the television screen? Are these crude reconstructions of Birnbaum's method not an indication of the fraught relationship the artist has with the popular, here figured by a clumsy technology, which is to say with the masses, no less than latter-day aesthetic conditions, whether they are the "poor image," the aspect ratios and time codes that supercut instruction manuals tell us to think about, and so on? So this is the first lesson to be learned by thinking about Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* in the age of Steyerl's "poor image" (and rest assured, in comparison to the high definition of today's Hollywood, and much contemporary video art, Birnbaum's *is* a poor image): the technological assumptions of the work is actually about the transformation of the artist into a member of the masses. But before turning to the second lesson, it is worth looking at another, more recent, cultural object that seeks to help us think about gender and technology.

Does *Ex Machina* have an unconscious?

In Alex Garland's 2015 film *Ex Machina*, an AI-imbued, and gendered, robot strives to pass a Turing test. Too, in an early sequence, the robot Ava (Alicia Vikander) turns the Turing around, as it were, and asks Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) about himself—she is a shrink, like Samantha in *Her*—and, indeed, the film *Ex Machina's* sequences themselves are labeled as "Ava Session 1" and so on. And recalling the discussion of the Cloud in the preceding chapter, Ava's intelligence, we are told, comes from Nathan's (Oscar Isaac) tech company, "Bluebook," a search engine, and not so much from *what* users search for, but the *form* of their questions. But this is also a cue for how to approach *Ex Machina* in terms of the questions with which this book has been engaging.

(We might first wonder at how Žižek will frequently argue that the task of philosophy is to ask questions, not to provide answers. And if we frequently think of Google as the *Sujet supposé de savoir*, and enjoy the fantasy of Google and other tech companies or governments stealing our secrets, we less often inquire into what it means to ask the questions we do in the search engine, what it means to ask those questions. The users of search engines are themselves the prototypical Internet philosopher, perhaps.)

First question: Does Ava have an unconscious? Would the ultimate Turing test determine, not self-awareness, but layers of knowledge, what

Donald Rumsfeld calls the "unknown known"? Here we can turn to Žižek's riff on the Turing test,[11] where he reminds us that Alan Turing's heuristic was, indeed, originally one about gender. When Turing describes the "imitation game," in his 1950 paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," he declares that, "[t]he object of the game for the interrogator is to determine which of the other two is the man [A] and which is the woman [B]."[12] Turing then, a paragraph or two later in the paper, substitutes a machine for one of the two players—for the male, A. The gendered "imitation game" then, for the rest of Turing's twenty-page article, is forgotten, but *Ex Machina* suggests that the question of gender is the unconscious of digital, or artificial, intelligence.

And so, we can then ask, Is Ava an Internet philosopher? At first glance, sure: Nathan tells Caleb how Ava is able to replicate human expressions from the cameras activated by the millions of cell phones in use, and, further, that her intelligence is derived from Bluebook's search engine data. Again, to be more specific: not what people search for (although Nathan later admits he designed her body from Caleb's porn profile: an aesthetics of Big Data, perhaps), but *how* they search: "impulses, responses, fluid, imperfect, pattern, chaotic." Ava is an Internet philosopher, her data derived from the Selfie (the cameraphones' pictures of their users) and the Cloud (the storage of search requests). So, what does this mean? First, that data (or information) wants to be free—thus, the plotline of the film only reaffirms the most banal of digital truisms. But, perhaps more cinematically—the two films one thinks of when watching *Ex Machina* are *Apocalypse Now* and *The Shining*. The latter because of the claustrophobic hallways and rooms of Nathan's jungle retreat—one expects to see a kid riding a Big Wheel toy down a hallway. And certainly the closet of abandoned women's bodies from which Ava constructs her identity at the film's close is akin to the ghost dance in *The Shining*. But the former, the suggestion of Conrad's imperialist fable, *Heart of Darkness*, and Coppola's Vietnam-era remake, is due not only to how Garland, the director/writer of *Ex Machina*, drops those references. The icefields and jungle that surround Nathan's house, the helicopter that drops off Caleb (and picks up Ava): surely these are filmic settings or analogues for the "imperial jungle," the jungle that today is as likely to harbor a drug lord, a social media baron, or any everyday hedge fund manager's getaway (think, too, of the Latin American retreat for the Edward Snowden type in Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*.) Perhaps the unconscious of *Ex Machina* lies in its spatiality in Nathan's bachelor pad, part research facility, part James Bond villain's lair.

Is AI an Event? While Nathan tells Caleb that he (Nathan) is Ava's father, a better clue to the gender dynamics can be found (heard) in the last song we hear in the film, over the second set of credits: the Savages' *Husbands*

(which begins: "I woke up and I saw the face of a guy/I don't know who he was, he had no eyes"). Here, it is the husband who is the zombie, the robot, the dead-to-the-world automaton (the Steptford Husband). This is all by way of thinking about the gender politics of "fidelity" to the Event as demanded by Žižek and Badiou. If AI is an Event (as the film declares: an Event in human history, or even the history of the gods), and thus, in this film, a gendered Event, then what does it mean to demand a fidelity to that Event? Who should be faithful to whom? The film's narrative depicts the "bro-gammer" Nathan as indisputably unfaithful (the different AI skins/corpses are in his closets, after all)[13] while Ava cannot, presumably, be trusted to be faithful. Fidelity, then, is a moral code for women to adhere to, not men. What of Žižek's three forms of infidelity to the Event (disavowal, false imitation, direct ontologization), how do they map onto our film? Or, rather, how do they map on once they are collated with gender? Male disavowal takes the form of supposing that a gendered AI would also be a sexualized AI (thus, Nathan tells Caleb that Ava has a concentration of sensors between her legs, as if sexual pleasure were merely a matter of code or algorithms). Female disavowal, judged by Ava's escape (from out of the forest and into the city: from nature into the social), is to presume that an AI Event would still be a human Event: and thus predicated on freedom. A false imitation of the Event of AI (and are we back at Turing's "imitation game"?) can be located in the film's aesthetics, in the gentle way with which characters approach doorways, each other, glass windows or glasses of vodka. The hesitation with which characters touch things (and even the two robots each other, near the film's conclusion)—call it the haptic-hesitation—is surely akin to the well-known YouTube genre of "unboxing" videos, and more specifically the care with which such video stars begin their spiel as they sit with a package before them. The direct ontologization of the AI Event then will be its conceit that an AI would/must be embodied and, further, embodied in a simulation of the human form. For surely the greatest affront to our *amour-propre* is not that machines can think, but that they can do so without looking like us.

This is to ask, then, is AI a thing or a body? Put another way, is artificial intelligence a matter of a machine, a Thing (which also may be an *objet petit a*, something we never had—we were never human, we never had consciousness) or is it a matter of a body that then is a worker (in this case, *Ex Machina*, as Flisfeder and I argue with respect to *Her*, is about a worker's revolt)? One of the remarkable effects of *Ex Machina* is how the two—the machinic and the body—are combined, if not seamlessly, then in ways that reinforce each other. Nathan is all body, indeed may be an autistic idiot savant with his bro-speak and working the heavy bag.

Deus ex gaze

Questions of gender in *Ex Machina* were influentially raised by Angela Watercutter in a 2015 article for Wired.com:

> If this argument about the roles women get in movies versus the roles men get is starting to sound familiar, it should. Ever since Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" film critics and fans have been monitoring the ways that women are represented and seen onscreen. (If you've heard the term "the male gaze," this is why.) This ongoing discourse is the reason things like the Bechdel Test, which started out just as a comic strip referencing *Alien,* struck a nerve and stuck around. The thrust of Mulvey's argument is that the bulk of films are seen from a male perspective—that a woman in a film is often "tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." Yes, Ava learns to use seduction as manipulation, and the audience might learn how screwed up that is because it's more blatant when even a robot can pull it off, but *Ex Machina* doesn't go any further in deconstructing the problem than that. She's a bearer, not a maker.[14]

Watercutter's contribution to the gendered debate over *Ex Machina*, as her reference to Mulvey makes clear, relies crucially on what Todd McGowan has identified as the "*Screen* fallacy," or the belief that looking gives one power, that looking is itself a matter of gender, and, finally, that that theory comes from Lacan, from the Lacan of the mirror stage essay. The answer to such a misreading of Lacan (an influential misreading, but a misreading nonetheless) is to stress how, for Lacan, the gaze is not about mastery, but about lack, about castration, about not seeing.[15] McGowan, in the 2007 book *The Real Gaze,* and, more recently, in his short book on psychoanalytic theory and *The Rules of the Game*, argues convincingly that film theorists in the 1970s misread Lacan's essay on the mirror stage, and attribute power to the gaze (the film spectator, like the child before the mirror, sees an image it somehow controls). Rather, McGowan argues[16]—drawing on Joan Copjec—Lacan "focuses on what disrupts our mastery when we look" (61), the gaze is about lack, about the traumatic Real (64). The "gaze is a blank point—a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience—within the aesthetic structure of the film, and it is the point at which the spectator is obliquely included in the film."[17]

This is the Copjec-Žižek-McGowan line of thought, and it is illustrated in *Ex Machina* in the scene toward the end of the film when Ava assembles her body from those hanging in Nathan's Bluebeard-like closets. Caleb

is watching her do so, but his watching has none of the lascivious nature that we would be led to expect. He is not leering, panting, or ogling. Rather, he is frustrated, uneasy, first of all pressing the palms of his hands against the fish tank through which he sees her (again, the haptic). Caleb does *not* understand, nor does he have any power. This scene would be, according to the Copjec-Žižek-McGowan Lacanian revisionism, the moment of the Lacanian gaze in the film.

But Caleb's encounter with the digital-feminine also has a class component to it, in the sense that Ava, like Nathan's servant-sextoy Kyoko, evidently has been constructed and programed to work for Nathan, but also in a more Lacanian genealogy of the gaze itself. One of Lacan's signal examples of the gaze is the "sardine can" story he tells in *Seminar XI* (also known as "The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis"). Lacan is on a working vacation:

> of course, being a young intellectual, I wanted desperately to get away, see something different, throw myself into something practical, something physical, in the country say, or at the sea. One day, I was on a small boat, with a few people from a family of fishermen in a small port. At that time, Brittany was not industrialized as it is now. There were no trawlers. The fisherman went out in his frail craft at his own risk. It was this risk, this danger, that I loved to share. But it wasn't all danger and excitement—there were also fine days. One day, then, as we were waiting for the moment to pull in the nets, an individual known as Petit-Jean, that's what we called him—like all his family, he died very young from tuberculosis, which at that time was a constant threat to the whole of that social class—this Petit-Jean pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me—*You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!*
>
> He found this incident highly amusing—I less so. I thought about it. Why did I find it less amusing than he? It's an interesting question.[18]

Whether or not we read Lacan's anecdote as a rejoinder to *Screen* fallacy of the male gaze,[19] it is nonetheless possible to allegorize that *petite histoire* as a statement on the nonrelation between the intellectual and the working class. We have an urban intellectual, retreating to the country side, confronted with workers leading an extraordinarily dangerous life, not only in their toil for production—at sea in "frail craft"—but also in their very biology, threatened as they are by tuberculosis. And yet such workers—or at least Ti-Jean—can nonetheless mock the intellectual, pointing out how their product, the sardine

can (this shiny commodity is metonymically connected to their labor), even though he can see it (and thus may think he masters it), cannot see him. He does not exist for the workers, the narrative tells us. "Petit-Jean meant this remark as an insult indicating that Lacan did not belong in the coastal town where he had ensconced himself, that he had no place in the world of the fishing village," as McGowan remarks.[20] And yet to remain satisfied with this summary is merely to reinstate the worker as the *sujet supposé de savoir*, the worker as the one who knows, who is impervious to ideology. Rather—and this is McGowan's interpretation—the sardine can "looks" at Lacan in a distorted way just as Lacan "looks" at the working class: the first distortion caused by the play of light, of sunshine, on the ocean and the can, the second caused by Lacan's desire for the authenticity (an authenticity unto death) of the working class.

This castrated gaze, Žižek reminds us, is also made manifest in points of the stain, the blot, the anamorphic distortion.[21] Jameson marks a similar moment in *Days of Eclipse,* commenting on a quick succession of scenes where the protagonist burns his papers, we see an apartment wall that appears to be burned or scorched but also hairy and pus-y, in turn reminding us of a gunshot wound on a dead (but talking!) scientist: "this supernatural *spot* or stain becomes something like the technique's meta-image and its way of designating itself autoreferentially" (*GA*, 105–106).

The second lesson: The big Other and the gaze

There are two different ways this book has discussed the big Other. Earlier, in Chapter 3, when I set out to articulate differences between Žižek and "left #Accelerationism," I refer to moments in *Absolute Recoil* where Žižek discusses the lack in the big Other, either in terms of being "inconsistent, self-contradictory, thwarted, traversed by antagonisms, without any guarantee" *or* in terms of being the subject experiencing "the lack/gap in the (substantial) Other [as] the condition of possibility, the site, of the subject itself."[22] Then, in Chapter 7, I begin thinking of the big Other in terms of Lacan's formula of sexuation via digitality or the virtual: there is no big Other/there *is* a big Other and it's virtual. There are different ways of thinking of the big Other: virtual, sexual, and contradictory, so that in some way these gaps and contradictions *in the big Other* give rise to the subject itself, and then can be reframed or reconfigured in terms of the great theme of Jameson's work that we can bring to this discussion of a digital Žižek: the relation between the intellectual and the working classes. *For the intellectual, the working class* is *the big Other.*

At this juncture, then, I want to work through the logic of there is no big Other/there is a (virtual or digital, that is, non-) big Other with respect

to, first, there is no relation/there is a nonrelation and second, to notions of retroactivity. In four of our examples we have seen precisely such retroactive thinking: the question of the gaze in *Ex Machina* is not about male power but about lack—a retroactive recasting of Lacan from the Imaginary to the Real; the "meaning" of *Stalker* as now suddenly about socialism at the end of history rather than 1970s bureaucracy; Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* as part of the genealogy of the supercut (which is to say, the artistic refashioning of popular culture itself becomes a method for pop culture fandom); and Steyerl's "poor image" *qua* concept emerging out of how contemporary digital media "fulfills the original ambitions of militant and (some) essayistic and experimental cinema." Then, to think this in turn through some of the arguments and themes of this book; and, finally, to think about not only the various nonrelations discussed in this book (sexual, digital, labor, other hierarchies such as that between the intellectual and the masses) but also how their non-ness functions—as distortion, whether there can actually ever be a relation (or is this the presbyopia of the intellectual, given as she or he is as often to desiring the ivory tower as to crossing the moat), if local instances of the nonrelation is just a justification for rigid sexual (or worker) roles. Finally, is our relation with the big Other *qua* Substance one in which our divided subjectivity is of a piece with that senseless Other (we are guilt-ridden intellectuals *because* the workers "don't know what's good for them")? In essence, then, I am saying (or asking if) there lies a crucial dialectic, which is to say a dialectic of lack between the nonrelation (fundamentally, all nonrelations have to do with class) and the big Other (the big Other doesn't exist, is virtual, which is to say is digital). To work this out we need two final cultural objects: the anti-diversity theories of Walter Benn Michaels, and the hedonistic bro-cinema of Judd Apatow.

On lack in Walter Benn Michaels

As noted earlier, we find in Lacan a working out—or perhaps an allegory (and those are two different things, a praxis vs. a hermeneutics)—of the class position in the parable of the sardine can. This deflationary epic, as Joan Copjec calls it, which stages the nonrelation of the intellectual and the worker, is updated in Walter Benn Michaels' work (from *The Trouble with Diversity* to *The Beauty of a Social Problem*), where our affective relation to capital functions as a screen, obfuscating the way in which identity politics enable the widening of social inequality. Michaels is surely correct to argue that merely changing the demographic makeup of elite colleges or ruling-class

professions will not change social conditions—and the concomitant insight that class, unlike race or gender (or sexuality) is not a social construction. One's class is not improved if one is viewed more sympathetically: one is still an underpaid Walmart clerk or precariously employed university lecturer. But Michaels neglects affect (which is to say, ideology) at his peril: class, or capital, are both a matter of how they are conceived. Here is an example from *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, a reading of a photograph.[23] Jeff Wall's *Mimic* (1982) is a large, backlit transparency; a street scene, it shows a redneck, a white trash biker type (denim, beard, stringy hair), walking down the sidewalk, pulling his scantily clad girlfriend by the arm. He is walking past an Asian male and pulling his eye back as if to imitate the Asian's "slanted eye." A moment of street drama (Wall's photographs are often depictions of scenes he has witnessed, but reconstructed), of racist "mimicry," of gendered (but muted) brutality. For Michaels, the photograph is about "two axes of social distinction": class and race. One can be changed by social affect (race), the other cannot (class). And here Wall's method comes into play: by reconstructing a scene—by not "taking" a documentary photograph but instead "making" a near-documentary simulacrum—he asserts the autonomy of the photograph qua work of art. It is not indexical; there can be no *punctum*. It is a picture of a picture of the world, and, therefore, to use our language in this book, it figures the nonrelation between the worker and the intellectual. Or to be more Žižekian, Wall's picture (in Michaels' reading) enjoys its nonrelation.

To bring together—perhaps in a dialectical fashion—the positions or allegories at work in Lacan and Jameson with respect to the relation or nonrelation between the intellectuals and the working class: in Walter Benn Michaels, there is no relation (no affect) but also no nonrelation (or a lack of the nonlack). Matthew Flisfeder argues that Adorno is like Lacan in his negativity, Adorno has lack (translated, via the phrasebook at the back of Lonely Planet, as "negative dialectics"); however, he lacks the act. There is no revolution, or rebellion, other than the doomed fate of the revolution that fails by succeeding. But for Lacan we still have the possibility of the ethical act—the act of Antigone who insists to-her-death on performing the last rites for her brother, the act of Sygne de Coûfontaine's in Claudel's play, saving the life of her horrid husband. But this is still Lacan before the social links promulgated in *Seminar XVII* (the master, the university, the hysterical, the analytic). This (*Seminar VII*, the seminar of the Act and of Antigone) is Lacan of the big Other (of Stalin, or Sartre), still Heideggerian-existentialist, a structuralism not even yet of lack, but only of fantasy ($<>*a*).

So here is the problem: the act as answer to lack itself lacks. The act lacks. It lacks the social (solidarity)—it lacks what it already did not have in

Michaels' cynical critique of leftist fashion. For Michaels, affect, solidarity, sentimentalism are all a matter of empty gestures, of hollow emotions that not only do not do anything but make us feel better, but also in fact enable inequality, the only inequality that matters: economic inequality. It doesn't matter how we *feel* about the working class that matters, he says, it is the quality of their jobs. Class solidarity does not matter a whit. Michaels sees "La'cannily," that there is no relation between the intellectuals and the masses. No class solidarity, just the remorseless workings of the dialectic. But he doesn't think there is a nonrelation. (The positive of the negative, of the lack.)

If for Jameson, the nonrelation, the lack of relation in the classes, is tragic, then for Michaels (and also perhaps for Žižek?), it's comic. And to return to my Bluetooth example above: the psychotic is he who thinks there *is* a class relation. This is the activist's phantasy—or, rather, the would-be activist's—she hears voices of the poor. Whereas Michaels, qua pervert, knows the desire of the Other (which is to say, capital), enacts it, the law (which is his argument that diversity does the dirty work of capital) thus believes in the big Other (believing in the big Other but not in the nonrelation vs. believing in the nonrelation but not the big Other).

Into the abyss

What is more disgusting, shit, or … the Internet? Žižek helps us to think this disgusting question through in *Disparities*, where he not only says that where shit goes when we flush the toilet is actually more terrifying (more "horrifyingly sublime") than the shit itself and, further, that the toilet resembles nothing so much as Malevich's *Black Square*. Žižek begins by arguing that the Real in Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) "is not primarily the horrifyingly disgusting stuff re-emerging from the toilet bowl, but rather the bowl itself, the gap which serves as the passage to a different ontological order" (*Disparities*, 160), adding, or asking, if the look of a toilet bowl (presumably one full of excrement) reproduces Malevich's "minimalist visual scheme, a black (or, at least darker) square of water enframed by the white surface of the bowl itself." The Real, finally, is neither the excrement nor the toilet per se, but rather "the topological hole or torsion which 'curves' our space of reality." Shit goes somewhere, and that going somewhere, is the Real—not, to be clear, that *where* it goes is the Real (to a sewage plant or the ocean or even an outhouse), but, Žižek claims, the way in which it disappears into "an alternative dimension which is not part of our everyday reality … a kind of passage to the other Scene of the unconscious netherworld."

Here Žižek is now discussing another toilet scene, in *Psycho*, and he goes on to comment not only on Hitchcock's own "obsession with cleaning the bathroom or the toilet" but also how such virtue in cleanliness demonstrates the Aquinian point of how "one can accomplish an evil act in a virtuous way" (*Disparities*, 161). A similar paradox can be seen in the documentary about the band Wilco, *I Am Trying to Break Your Heart* (Sam Jones, 2002). At one point in the film, the band's lead singer, Jeff Tweedy, overcome by stomach ulcers and tensions in the group, rushes to a recording studio toilet to throw up. Afterwards, he rolls up swathes of toilet paper to clean his puke off the toilet bowl. Given that the film's thesis is how virtuous this indie rock band was (after their label refuses to release their new album because it lacks a hit, they stream it themselves and eventually sign a contract with the same label), Tweedy's actions seem to lack any contradiction: they are virtuous, pure, and simple. But really, given how pervasive the myth is of rock stars trashing hotel rooms and generally acting like assholes, is not Tweedy's actions—or, rather, is not their inclusion in the film—more like a sign of Tweedy (or the film director)'s trying too hard, of good old fetishistic disavowal? I know very well he actually is a rock star—or I wouldn't be making this film—but I will nonetheless burnish the myth of a regular guy.

The problem also is that the scene shows Tweedy cleaning the toilet, not where the puke has gone—which is to say, *à la* Žižek, the Real of the torsion of plumbing. Which is also, we can argue, the Real of the Internet (remember, the Internet is just a series of tubes). Working through this logic, we can return to the earlier discussion, in this book, of the toilet scene in *This Is Forty.* Paul Rudd's character, Pete, is playing Scrabble on his iPad: the camera pulls back, and we see that he is on the toilet. He is getting some "me time"; he is in his "happy place," to use our contemporary vernacular. This is very much an upper-class Los Angeles situation: the toilet is by itself, in its own room, separate from the sink and bathtub, like one would see in an Edwardian or Victorian house. His wife, Debbie, opens the door and says he is missing out on family time; their daughter has just done a flip on the trampoline. Why, she asks him, is his instinct to escape? The answer lies in the question, for Debbie then asks why she does not smell anything? Further, why can't she take a look at his shit? Pete declares, "I've been flushing as I go," and when she grabs his tablet, he says, panic stricken, "Don't hit send, I'm not sure." Sending—a Scrabble word, an email—is both the digital form of flushing the toilet and a kind of escape. Flushing as he goes—as though his anus itself were part of the toilet, part of the Internet (livestreaming one's defecation). We have all had the experience, haven't we, of hitting send, or "reply all" after writing an indecorous email?

What we have so far, then, is the following logic:

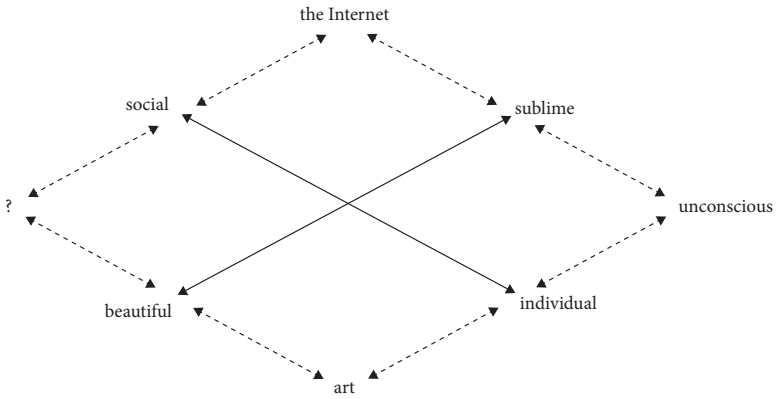

Figure C.2 Semiotic Rectangle (the Social and the Sublime).

The Internet—where we send our emails, Scrabble entries, job applications, and dating choices—which is to say, our excrement, is thus both social and (horrifyingly) sublime. Its dystopian other is art, which is merely beautiful—but is also individual, is made by a person (the Internet is terrifyingly social, it is the hell that is other people, as Sartre said). That sublime which is also individual is then the unconscious (so, not so much *does the Internet have an unconscious*, as this book's title would have it, but, perhaps, is the Internet our unconscious?). But what goes on the left, what is both social and beautiful? Perhaps this is the point at which to remember the artwork that Žižek will often compare to the *The Black Square*—Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, his "found" art that is a urinal. It is a work of art, to be sure, but it always reminds the museumgoer of the world outside the gallery, doesn't it? Duchamp famously said that America's most beautiful works of art are its bridges and its plumbing, and so the urinal (which is both an artwork and plumbing) can stand in, on the left side of the rectangle, as what is both social and beautiful.

These two final sections of my conclusion, then, should be brought together, whether in a synthesis or to fight it out: first, we have Michaels' despair over the social, over social struggle and solidarity, a despair that is nonetheless resolutely critical, steadfast in its opposition to feel-good gestures, an opposition that signifies a belief in the "irreducibility of social structure to our affective relation to that structure" (172). This despair is not unrelated to the condition of photography, or art, or "good art," which, by asserting its autonomy (but not the digital: "even leaving digitality out of it for the moment," Michaels argues, the realism of photography is problematic; later he will say in an endnote, *apropos* of Paul Strand and Walker Evans, that

he is "talking about straight and predigital photography"),[24] acquiesces to the very conditions he is trying to change (the nonrelation). With *This Is Forty*, or at least the scene I keep returning to, it's the other way around: it is not so much a matter of leaving the digital out of it "for the moment," but instead the digital is a way to leave the social (here figured by the family), a leaving of the social (playing Scrabble on one's iPad in the toilet) that is even more disgusting than taking a shit.

Notes

Introduction

1 Needless to say, not all readers will be convinced by this contextualization of Žižek's attitudes with respect to the refugee crisis. For an example of a more full-throated response, see Sam Kriss's blog article "Building Norway: A critique of Slavoj Žižek." Kriss's argument, however, is more concerned with hurt feelings over Žižek's mobilization of invective and recognition of the strength of anti-immigration momentum. *Idiot Joy Showland*, Sept. 11, 2015. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
2 Slavoj Žižek, "Clinton, Trump and the Triumph of Global Capitalism," inthesetimes.com, Aug. 24, 2016. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

Chapter 1

1 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), vol. XIV, 15–16. All further references follow the usual form (SE XIV, 15–16). It will be noted that in what follows I do not argue that what the Internet contains what we repress: Jon Beasley Murray argued, at a presentation of this paper in Vancouver, that such a difference suggests a Foucauldian reading of the Internet.
2 With respect to plasticity, please see François Ansermet and Pierre Magistretti, *Biology of Freedom: Neural Plasticity, Experience, and the Unconscious* (London: Karnac, 2007). D. Buller, *Adapting Minds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). Catharine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2005).
3 Clint Burnham, "Slavoj Žižek as Internet Philosopher," in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), and in this volume.
4 Please see Robert A. Rushing, *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture* (New York: Other, 2007), 19–25. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 48–66.
5 For such nostalgia, see in particular the late Mark Fisher's blogging on cultural artifacts of the 1970s, from Joy Division and LeCarré to Jimmy Savile, collected in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hautology and Lost Futures* (London: Zer0, 2013).

6 Three fictions appeared during the writing of this book that simultaneously support and refute my claim. Ed Park's "Slide to Unlock" short story, in *The New Yorker*'s summer 2013 fiction issue, is a crime narrative in which a robbery victim tries to remember his ATM password (Web); Dave Eggers' 2013 novel, *The Circle*, features a Facebook-like company which offers a "TruYou" online subjectivity with one password for all websites: "The era of false identities, identity theft, multiple user names, complicated passwords and payment systems was over" (21). Also in the fall of 2013, Google announced the impending demise of online passwords, which has not yet come about. More recently, in Zoe Whittal's 2016 novel *The Best Kind of People,* we can detect a social media fatigue, or perhaps the "Event" of social media is over, when a character's reaction to a scandal about his high school affair with a gay coach is to immediately delete his Facebook account.

7 Thus, in terms of the clinical situation, the US military used Skype sessions as a form of therapy for soldiers stationed in war zones. "Military Expands Mental Health Counseling in Afghanistan to Soldiers over 'Classified Skype,'" *The Guardian*, Feb. 1, 2013. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

8 Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (New York: Semiotiext(e), 2012).

9 "Facebook Ads Guide," *Social Ads Tool.* Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

10 Please see Julia Angwin et al., "Facebook Enabled Advertisers to Reach 'Jew Haters,'" *Propublica.org*, Sept. 14, 2017. Web. Accessed Sept. 26, 2017. Describing Facebook's ad targeting algorithms, the reporters note that they "chose additional categories that popped up when we typed in 'jew h': 'How to burn Jews,' and 'History of "why jews ruin the world."'"

11 Please see Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump* (London: Zer0, 2017). Nagle's book has attracted not a little criticism from the left for its neglect of class and somewhat hasty reading of the 1990s culture wars and present-day debates over trans identities. See, for example, Jules Joanne Gleeson's review article "Normietivity," Newsocialist.org. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

12 Please see Matthew Flisfeder, "The Ideological Algorithmic Apparatus: On the Prior Instance of Subjection in the Enslavement to the Machine," forthcoming.

13 For Lacan, in *Seminar X: L'Angoisse*, such obsessions would indicate an anxiety (session of June 26, 1963).

14 Jacques Lacan, "Position of the Unconscious," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 703–29. All future references are made parenthetically in the text (*Écrits*).

15 "L'inconscient est un concept forgé sur la trace de ce qui opera pour constituer le sujet." Jacques Lacan, "Position de l'inconscient," in *Écrits II* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 308–30, 310.

16 After a European Court of Justice ruling on "the right to be forgotten," Google began, in summer 2014, to remove information from its search

engine. "Google Starts Removing Search Results under Europe's 'Right to Be Forgotten,'" *Washington Post*, June 26, 2014. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

17 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Form* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). All future references are made parenthetically in the text (*PU*).

18 This emphasis on the visual in *The Political Unconscious* reaches its apogee in Jameson's chapter on the novels of Joseph Conrad ("Romance and Reification"), drawing not a little from Conrad's famous declaration, "above all, to make you see."

19 Owens was on the cover of, and interviewed in, *Artforum* (Mar. 2013). An earlier interview by novelist Rachel Kushner appears in *The Believer* in May 2003. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

20 "Post-Internet art" refers to art made since the early 2000s, when the Internet is ubiquitous and banal, using its methods for artworks both on and off the internet (which is to say after net art, a 1990s phenomenon, and made to be seen on the net). See the early (2009–2010) discussion of "post-Internet art" by Artie Vierkant, "The Image Object Post-Internet," Artievierkant.com. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

21 This art world synergy is nothing new, whether we go back a century to what Roger Shattuck called the "banquet years" of the historical avant-garde, when, for example, Picasso celebrated buying a Matisse painting with a party, the catering details of which are rendered in Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, or we remember Seth Siegelaub's Maoist marketing of the conceptualists in the 1960s, documented in Alexander Alberro's *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

Chapter 2

1 Matthew Flisfeder provides a fascinating genealogy of the various *Star Wars* releases, digital insertions, and rereleases; in sum, he argues, the film's "digital formalism concedes its 'historicity.'" See *Postmodern Theory and Bladerunner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 90–91.

2 Kenneth Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xix.

3 Žižek cited in David J. Gunkel, "Recombinant Thought: Slavoj Žižek and the Art and Science of the Mash-Up," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 6, no. 3 (2012): 5. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

4 Slavoj Žižek, "How to Begin from the Beginning," *New Left Review* 57, May–June 2009, 54.

5 Reid Pillifant, "Hipsters Die Another Death at n+1 Panel: 'People Called Hipsters Just Happened to Be Young, and, More Often Than Not, Funny-Looking,'" *New York Observer*, Apr. 13, 2009. Web. Accessed Jan. 23, 2013.
6 "Slavoj Žižek: Don't Act. Just Think," *Big Think*. YouTube. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
7 See the open access version of *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew Gold: http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/ for Sample's essay. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
8 See John Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Polity, 2010), esp. chapter 9, "The Digital Revolution."
9 See, in this regard, Gabriella Coleman's fascinating ethnography among hacktivists, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Story of Anonymous* (London: Verso, 2014).
10 Whitney Phillips, "LOLing at Tragedy," *First Monday* 16, no. 12 (Dec. 5, 2011). Web. Nagle's *Kill All Normies* argues that "memorial trolls" demonstrate the metastasizing of "the empty and fraudulent ideas of countercultural transgression that created the void into which anything can now flow as along as it is contemptuous of mainstream values and tastes" (105). That is, Nagle finds the origin of obscene, alt-right, and "manosphere" taste cultures online in the previously left-wing counterculture. This is an attractive argument, but falters in its simplistic accounts of the role and ideas of Sade, Nietzsche, and the like.
11 Hiep Dang, "The Origins of Social Engineering from Odysseus' Trojan Horse to Phishing on the Internet: Deception just Won't Go Away," *McCaffee Security Journal* (Fall 2008): 4–8. See also, for background, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, "A Conversation with Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani," *BelindaOtas.com,* Feb. 24, 2010. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
12 Brendan Koerner, "The Nigerian Nightmare: Who's Sending You All Those Scam E-Mails?" *Slate,* Oct. 22, 2002. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
13 See the incomparable spam archive Scamorama. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
14 Cruikshank, Douglas. "I Crave Your Distinguished Indulgence (and all your cash)," *Salon,* Aug. 7, 2001. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
15 Please see Chris Cleave, Rev. of *I Do Not Come to You by Chance. Washington Post Online*, May 23, 2009. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. Pius, Adesanmi, "Face Me, I Book You: Writing Africa's Agency in the Age of the Netizen," http://xokigbo.wordpress.com. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. Wendy L. Cukier et al., "Genres of Spam: Expectations and Deceptions," Proceedings of the 39th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 2006. Wendy L. Cukier et al., "Genres of Spam: Expectations and Deceptions," *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems* 20, no. 1 (2008): 69–92. Deborah Schaffer, "The Language of Scam Spams: Linguistic Features of 'Nigerian Fraud' E-Mails," *ETC.: A*

Review of General Semantics 69, no. 2 (Apr. 2012): 157–79. Michelle Delio, "Meet the Nigerian E-Mail Grifters," *Wired,* July 12, 2002. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

16 Cormac Herley, "Why Do Nigerian Scammers Say They Are from Nigeria?" http://research.microsoft.com/pubs/167719/WhyFromNigeria, 12. PDF. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

17 See also Danny Sullivan, "How Google Instant's Autocomplete Suggestions Work," *Search Engine Land,* Apr. 6, 2011. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

18 Wana Udobang, "Literature's New Rock Chick," Bella Naija. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

19 Adesanmi, "Face Me, I Book You."

Chapter 3

1 See Christian Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011), 130.

2 Please see Alain Badiou, *Being and Event …* but also for insight into the term's genealogy in French philosophy (via Sartre), his essay "The Event in Deleuze," to be found in *Logic du sens* and, in English, in *parrhesia* 2 (2007): 37–44, trans. Jon Roffe; Deleuze develops his theory of the Event (via Whitehead), in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London: Athlone, 1993), chapter 6, "What Is an Event?" 76–82. Žižek's most sustained arguments are to be found in *The Ticklish Subject,* "On Alain Badiou and *Logiques des mondes*," and *Event*. Discussion of Badiou and Žižek's constellation of the term can be found in *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, ed. A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clements (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2010); Christopher Norris, *Badiou's Being and Event: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2009); Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformation: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009) [see esp. Johnston, 111–13]; *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004); Nicholas Brown's "{∅,$} ∈ $?" or, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, Waiting for Something to Happen," *The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 3 (Winter 2004): 289–319; and Peter Osborne, "More than Everything: Žižek's Badiouan Hegel," *Radical Philosophy* 177 (Jan./Feb. 2013): 19–25.

3 Another kind of doubling might be the sequel; Žižek discusses the 2010 remake of *The Karate Kid* in *Less than Nothing*, 946.

4 Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* (London: Palgrave, 2013).

5 The role of the "subject supposed to believe," key to Žižek's notion of "interpassivity," is also developed at length in Robert Pfaller's *On the*

Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners (London: Verso, 2015). Pfaller argues that Žižek's cynicism toward his own ideas depends on the fantasy of others believing in them. Who's to say whether the other participants in the "art round table" were not being polite?

6 See Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology: Or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), *passim,* and, for commentary on this, Robert Jackson, "If Materialism Is Not the Solution, What Was the Problem? A Response to Harman," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2014): 111–24.

7 Bogost's "Latour Litanizer" also recalls the varieties of machine reading/writing discussed in the previous chapter.

8 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, "Notebook IV—The Chapter on Capital," Marxists.org, Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

9 Please see David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (New York: Oxford, 2010), esp. chapter 2, "Capital Assembled." See also David Harvey, "Globalization and the Spatial Fix," *Geographische Revue* 2 (2001): 23–30, and for a critique, Bob Jessop, "Spatial Fixes, Temporal Fixes and Spatio-Temporal Fixes," in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Noel Castree and Derek Gregory (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 142–66.

10 See also Žižek, "Lenin's Choice," where he refers to a similar literalism when Schweik runs between two lines of troops saying "don't shoot! There are men on the other side!" (*Revolution at the Gates,* 200). He will also reference the Slovenian punk band Laibach for a similar overidentification. And then there's *Top lista nadrealista.* Is it racist to wonder why all the examples are Central European?

11 Ian Parker, "The Truth about Over-Identification," in *The Truth of Žižek*, ed. P. Bowman and R. Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007), 144–60.

12 Suzana Milevska, "Staged (In)Visibility," Republicart.net, Jan. 2005. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

13 K. Vuković, "To Be *Lifestreamed*," *Synthesis Philosophica* 50, no. 2 (2010): 239–52, 242–43.

14 Cited in *AR,* 273. Note that Žižek leaves out Kierkegaard's comment, "for if he wanted to do so, he would be able to demolish that argument by stronger proofs to the contrary."

15 "*Objet Petit a* and Digital Civilization," lecture, EGS, 2014. He also discusses the foregoing in *Event,* 63–65, and *AR,* 276–81.

16 Prostheses (and, synecdochely, science/technology) will supplant our human brain/body. Here I also want to think about David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's argument with respect to disability figuration in the literary via "narrative prostheses." This argument would also relate to the social critique of techno-fetishism as solution to political problems. See below in terms of lamella.

17 Christian Fuchs, "The Dialectic: Not just the Absolute Recoil, but the World's Living Fire That Extinguishes and Kindles Itself. Reflections on

Slavoj Žižek's Version of Dialectical Materialism in *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*," *triple-c* 12, no. 2 (2014): 848–75, 859. See also our discussion after my talk at CAMRI, University of Westminster, London, Jan. 2015.

18 Samo Tomšič, "The Technology of *Jouissance*," *Umbr(a): Technology* (2012): 143–60.

19 Facebook, Oct. 4, 2014.

20 See Reza Negarestani's "The Labor of the Inhuman," *e-flux*, Feb. 2014. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

21 Please see, with respect to Žižek and his critique of historicism, *Everything You Wanted to Know about Literature but Were Afraid to Ask Žižek*, ed. Russell Sbriglia (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). Of particular interest are the contributions of Todd McGowan and Sbriglia. In McGowan's critique of historicism ("The Bankruptcy of Historicism"—89–106), he argues, for example, "We must retain the category of the masterpiece despite the ideological uses that critics have made of it because it provides a name for the power of the literary work to change our symbolic coordinates" (101). In his essay on nineteenth-century American literature ("The Symptoms of Ideology Critique," 107–36), Sbriglia makes a strong case for a critique of historicist or "symptomatic" readings *not*, however, by following the "surface reading" arguments of Steven Best and Sharon Marcus (see my summary of the debate in *Fredric Jameson and The Wolf of Wall Street* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 88–94) but in the name of a "fetishist" reading; the symptomatic or historicist reading, Sbriglia argues, tends to disavow its libidinal identification with the object. I would suggest, rather, that perhaps we could update to late Lacan the symptomatic reading as a *sinthomatic* reading, one that revels in its interpretive signifier penetrated by enjoyment.

22 Keucheyan argues that this "fideism" not only connects Badiou to the resurgence of quasi-theological thought (Žižek, but also Agamben, Santner, and the political-theological tradition [28–30; see Kostko]) but also places his system in danger of a left-aristocratic tendency (Keucheyan, 180–81). See also Bruno Besana on "The Subject," in *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, ed. A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2010), 38–47, esp. 43–46.

23 Badiou also talks about the problems of Internet dating or arranged marriages, but I am not convinced of these, of the cultural or algorithmicphobia in evidence.

24 I mean euphoria in a different way than my comrade Jeff Derksen, in his book *After Euphoria*, where he means a neoliberal social affect.

25 I take this to be Alberto Toscano's point when, at a Marxist Literary Group meeting (Vancouver, 2012), he criticized my paper on Lacan and Lenin. See, for Žižek's argument, a 2012 interview on Croatian television (since removed from YouTube).

26 All quotes are taken from a search (for "vagina") of the ebook version of Lena Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She "Learned"* (New York: Random House, 2014).

27 Tiqqun, *Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines (Los Angeles: semiotext(e), 2012).
28 Roxane Gay, "Lena Dunham: A Generation's Gutsy, Ambitious Voice," *Time,* Sept. 24, 2014. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
29 Santiago Zabala, "Slavoj Žižek and the Role of the Philosopher," Aljazeera .com, Dec. 25, 2012. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
30 While Tiananmen Square is often interpreted as a protest against Chinese totalitarianism, Wang Hui and others have argued that it was, in fact, a reaction against the spread of neoliberal capitalism in 1980s China. See Hong Huar, "Tiananmen '89 & The Rebellion of the Chinese Working Class," Bermudaradical.wordpress.com, June 11, 2010. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. Wang Hui, "China: Unequal Shares," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, English edition, Apr. 2002. Web. Accessed Nov. 27, 2017; Andrew G. Walder and Gong Xiaoxia, "Workers in the Tiananmen Protests: The Politics of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 29 (Jan. 1993): 1–29, and Keucheyan, 132–33.
31 I would add as a historical footnote another "Real pussy," a graffito that was seen in Toronto in the early 1990s: "pussy power" written around an ovoid with a line through it.
32 *Comradely Greetings*, Slavoj to Nadya, June 10, 2013.

Chapter 4

1 *Le Journal de la Triennale #2* (Paris: Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP), February 2012).
2 Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 246.
3 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII*. Available online at lacaninireland.com. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
4 Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects,* 10, 250.
5 Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects,* 133.
6 Quotations in this paragraph from Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects,* 131.
7 Theorists have begun to plumb the connections of the documentary with the "speculative turn," from "documentary video games" and photography (Ian Bogost and Cindy Poremba, "Can Games Get Real? A Closer Look at 'Documentary' Digital Games," in *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon*) to connections between film theory and OOO theory (Levi Bryant, "Cinema and Object-Oriented Ontology," Larvalsubjects.wordpress .com, May 3, 2010. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017; Dan Sullivan, "Film Theory as a Form of Procrastination," Sullivandaniel.wordpress.com, May 2, 2010. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017; but also Matthew Flisfeder on Žižek and film).

8 See Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology, passim*, for details of these various conferences.
9 Levi Bryant et al., eds. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 2.
10 Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), vii.
11 Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 29.
12 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 77.
13 See Andrew Iliadis, "Interview with Graham Harman (2)," *Figure/Ground,* Oct. 2, 2013. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
14 A spatial retroactivity can be conceived of via Jameson's cognitive mapping, but also the work of Marxist geographers David Harvey and Neil Smith with respect to displacement. For the former, see my discussion in *Fredric Jameson and the Wolf of Wall Street,* and for the latter, a representative text is David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (Sept.–Oct. 2008): 23–40. See also the discussion of Pierre Huyghe below.
15 Slavoj Žižek, *The Irony of Buddhism,* YouTube, Aug. 14, 2015. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
16 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 212.
17 Brian Kim Stefans, "Let's Get Weird: On Graham Harman's H.P. Lovecraft," *L.A. Review of Books,* Apr. 6, 2013. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
18 Gijs van Oenen in conversation: July 16, 2014.
19 See Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, chapter 5, "Dematerialization."
20 http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/27/arts/design/cory-arcangels-pro-tools-at-the-whitney-review.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
21 I am drawing here on Roberto Harari's book *Lacan's Seminar on "Anxiety": An Introduction* (New York: Other Press, 2001), chapter 2, "Not … without an Object. The Graph of Anxiety."
22 Here J.G. Ballard's and David Cronenberg's *Crash* are apposite, as, too, Ryan Gosling in *Drive.* I am guided in these thoughts by Kyle Carpenter's PhD dissertation on digital objects, SFU Department of English.
23 See, for these last details, Žižek's *Against the Double Blackmail.*
24 Michael Juliani, "Interview with Megan Boyle, Lit Girl," *Thought Catalog,* Dec. 3, 2011. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
25 Tao Lin, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 84. Quotations in the following pages are from the same edition.
26 Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public," N.d. Bruno-latour.fr. PDF. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
27 Jasper Bernes, Comments to "Zizek/flarf/Gurlesque," Exoskeleton-Johannes.blogspot.com, Aug. 12, 2008. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

28 The political critiques of OOO have been most forcefully articulated by Alexander Galloway, first in a blog post ("A response to Graham Harman's 'Marginalia on Radical Thinking'" Itself.blog. June 3, 2012, Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017) that is also very useful for its comment thread, where Levi Bryant, among others, engage in a debate on Galloway's and OOO's terms; see also Galloway's "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 347–66.

29 What is often ignored in discussion of this phenomenon is that while we enjoy our superiority to Trump's or Brexit followers, the same "paradox of solidarity-in-guilt" can be found on the left, as Žižek argues, when we elevate some cultural figure from the past (Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, Hitchcock) as a way of ignoring their problematic politics (*ME*, 58).

30 Matthew Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 102.

31 Or even a partial object, as Žižek characterizes the Cheshire cat's smile in *Less than Nothing* (30).

32 Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 41.

33 See Tom Cutterham's essay "Spectrum Order" (*The New Inquiry*, Aug. 2, 2013. Web. Accessed Sept. 27, 2017) and Lin's discussion of same in an interview: "Tao Lin talks to Christian Lorentzen," *Tank* 59, n.d. Web. Accessed Sept. 27, 2017.

34 Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic, 1954), 391–92.

35 "BACK TO THE GREAT OUTDOORS" by Simon Critchley. Review of: Quentin Meillassoux, *AFTER FINITUDE: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier. *Times Literary Supplement*, Feb. 28, 2009, 28. Here a Pierre Huyghe artwork is apposite: his *Shore* (2013) is made up by scraping layers of paint off a gallery wall, leaving the "sand" on the floor as a kind of beach, with a fossilized crab. Thus, three temporalities are juxtaposed: the time of the fossil, the layers of paint bespeaking years of exhibitions, and the time of the labor involved in scraping the walls.

36 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

37 The Know Your Meme entry from 2012 locates the practice as starting in the late 1990s. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

38 The argument is very close to the various takes on the neighbor "in its strict Freudo-Lacanian sense," as Žižek puts it in his essay "Neighbors and other Monsters." There he distinguishes the neighbor *qua* "Other in his or her dimension of the Real" as opposed to "neither … my Imaginary double/*semblant* nor … the purely symbolic abstract 'partner in communication'" (162). Whereas in *Less than Nothing*, Žižek situates the Imaginary *with* its symbolic and Real supplements, in the neighbor essay it is an either/or situation.

39 T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011).

40 Clark, *Farewell to an Idea,* 38 and 46, both quoted Santner, 91.

41 Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

42 Audio recordings are available here: http://www.radiolacan.com/en /topic/215/2. A transcription in English is available at the Lacaninireland .com website. The seminar has not been published in French. While "the name of the father" is that which divides us against ourselves, preventing direct access to *jouissance* and making possible language, the plural *names* of the father, Žižek argues, is a sign of the excess of the primordial father, he-who-enjoys (see Lacan.com). Thus, if "name of the father" is simply Lacan's linguistic update of the Oedipal prohibition, the superego *qua* Old Testament father, "names of the father" is the demand to enjoy, the superego that we can never enjoy enough.

43 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XXI*, www.lacaninireland.com, seminar of Nov. 13, 1973.

44 This is a common motif in Žižek's work, from *The Ticklish Subject* (323) to *The Parallax View* (347). Jameson discusses the concept in his *LRB* review of *The Parallax View* (vol. 28.17, Sept. 7, 2006, 7–8. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017) as does Paul Taylor in *Žižek and the Media.*

45 Huang Hu-yan discusses "a shift from Kantorowicz's motif of the king's two bodies to the digital or Internet subject's two bodies" (44) but does not elaborate. "'The Wound Is Healed Only by the Spear That Smote You': The Undead, Biopolitics and Psychoanalysis," *NTU Studies in Language and Literature* 31 (June 2014): 39–63. Bernhard Jussen provides a genealogy of Kantorowicz's work in medieval studies in "*The King's Two Bodies* Today," *Representations* 106, no. 1 (2009): 102–17. See also Boris Groys', "Marx after Duchamp: The Artist's Two Bodies," *e-flux* 19, Oct. 2010. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017, where he distinguishes between the artist's "working body" and his or her "natural, mortal body." These concepts have in turn been reflexively used to critique Žižek: see Claudia Berger, "The Leader's Two Bodies: Slavoj Žižek's Postmodern Political Theology," *Diacritics* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 73–90, and Žižek's response ("The Rhetorics of Power," 91–104), where, incredibly, he spends some time (*apropos* of Herbert Dreyfuss' 2001 book *On the Internet*) arguing for a critique of the idea that "the Real signals the inertia of material bodily reality which cannot be reduced to another digital construct" (99).

46 Gracie Mae Bradley, "*Cahier de la fuite du pays natal:* Migration to Europe in 2014," Gloriamundi.tumblr.com, 2015. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

47 *The World in Your Hand: On the Everyday Global Culture of the Mobile Phone*, ed. Miya Yoshida et al. (Dresden: Dresden Kunsthalle, 2010), 157.

48 Ursula Huws, "The Underpinnings of Class in the Digital Age: Living, Labor and Value," *Socialist Register* 50 (2014): 80–107.
49 S. Kamboureli, Keynote address, *ACCUTE* 2009, Ottawa. It is worth noting that in Dominic Johnson's report, he considers the use of mobile phones in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the labor to produce the coltan. Dominic Johnson, "Blood or Blessing? Mobile Communication in Africa," in *The World in Your Hand: On the Everyday Global Culture of the Mobile Phone*, ed. Miya Yoshida et al. (Dresden: Dresden Kunsthalle, 2010), 398–408.
50 C. Fuchs, "Theorizing and Analyzing Digital Labor: From Global Value Chains to Modes of Production," *The Political Economy of Communication* 2, no. 1 (2013): 3–27, 20.
51 John Roberts, "The Missing Factory," Metamute.org, July 11, 2012. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
52 Fuchs, "Theorizing and Analyzing Digital Labor," 11–12. "The Coltan Phenomenon," The Pole Institute, Jan. 2002. PDF. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. Johnson, "Blood or Blessing?" 401.
53 Adrian Chen, "The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed," *Wired.com,* Oct. 23, 2014. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. See also his conversation with Sarah Roberts, "The Invisible Sin Eaters," *The Awl,* Oct. 2014. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
54 See "The Hidden World of Facebook 'Like Farms'," *MIT Technology Review,* Sept. 19, 2014. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. Revelations of Russia-influenced Facebook ads were current as this book was being edited: Alexis Madrigal, "What, Exactly Were Russians Trying to Do with Those Facebook Ads?" *The Atlantic Monthly,* Sept. 25, 2017. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. But see also Adrian Chen's 2015 *New York Times Magazine* article "The Agency" on the Russian hacker group Internet Research Agency. *New York Times Magazine,* June 2, 2015.
55 Sadie Plant, *On the Mobile: The Effects of Mobile Telephones on Social and Individual Life* (Chicago: Motorola, 2001). Web. See also Paul Kingsbury's essay on "Uneasiness in Culture," where he discusses "the 'Phone Stack' game wherein the first diner who is unable to refrain from checking their smartphone, which is placed in a stack with other devices in the middle of the table, must pay for the entire meal" (7). Kingsbury argues that this is digital example of how "transgression supports the social enjoyment itself." Paul Kingsbury, "Uneasiness in Culture, or Negotiating the Sublime Distances towards the big Other," *Geography Compass* 11 (2017). doi:10.1111/gec3.12316.
56 *The World in Your Hand, passim.*
57 Svetlana Racanović, "M.P.—A Time Odyssey," 10. Galerie-stock.net, n.d. PDF. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
58 "Šejla Kamerić: When the Heart Goes Bing Bam Boom," Arter.org.tr, Dec. 11, 2015. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

59 *In Search of Balkania: A User's Manual*, ed. Roger Conover, Eda Čufer, and Peter Weibel (Graz: Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, 2002).
60 Ostojić's work is discussed in Marina Gržinić, *Situated Contemporary Art Practices: Art, Theory and Activism from (the East of) Europe* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2004).
61 Gržinić *Situated Contemporary Art Practices.* Cited in Parker, "The Truth about Over-Identification," 144–60.
62 *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, ed. Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). See especially Vesna Kesić's essay "Muslim Women, Croatian Women, Serbian Women, Albanian Women …" for a fine disentanglement of ethnicity and gender.
63 See the English translation (from the Serbian) by Novica Petrović, "Extravagnatia II: Koliko Fašizma? (How much fascism?)," *Red Thread Journal* 1 (2009). Web.
64 Jelena Vesić, "On a Certain Problem with Spelling: the Center and the Periphery of Europe—A Few Notes on Serbia and the Netherlands," in *Art and the F Word: Reflections on the Browning of Europe*, ed. Maria Lind and What, How & for Whom/WHW (Berlin: Sternberg, 2014), 77–134, 81.
65 *AR,* 64; *LtN,* 985; *Event*, 87, 158.
66 "Klemen Slakonja as Slavoj Zizek—The Perverted Dance (Cut the Balls)," YouTube, Oct. 18, 2013. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
67 "Slavoj Zizek Reacts to the Internet," Critical-theory.com, Aug. 18, 2014. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
68 This is not to say that the use or telling of a rape joke is either *verboten* or unproblematic (when Žižek told the joke at a Marxist conference in London in 2010, he was challenged from the audience, for example). We can think of feminist comedians' uses of rape jokes for anti-misogynist ends, as in Amy Schumer's TV series, where she has a skit parodying *Friday Night Lights* as a comment on small-town football rapists, or Samantha Bee's jokes that criticize US politicians' abandonment of the so-called rape kits.
69 On the contradictions of capitalism, and the paradox of choice, respectively: thersa.org.
70 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72.

Chapter 5

1 See Gawne and Vaughan for a scholarly history of LOLspeak's origins, and Dash for an early (2007) journalistic account.
2 Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime*, 17, 166.

3 Robert Pfaller, "Interpassivity and Misdemeanors: The Analysis of Ideology and the Žižekian Toolbox," *IJŽS* 1, no. 1 (2007), and Gijs Van Oenen, "Interpassivity Revisited: A Critical and Historical Reappraisal of Interpassive Phenomena," *IJŽS* 2, no. 2 (2008).
4 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 195901960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), 252.
5 Slavoj Žižek, "The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape," Inthesetimes.com, Oct. 20, 2005. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
6 Slavoj Žižek, "The Big Other Doesn't Exist," *Journal of European Psychoanalysis* (Spring–Fall 1997). Lacan.com. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
7 Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, 238–47.
8 Sadie Plant, *On the Mobile*.
9 Here is also one of Žižek's or Hitchcock's repetitions—in *Under Capricorn*, we see the same narrative—a creature or Thing on or not on the bed (in the earlier case a shrunken skull) bringing the postcolonial libidinality to the fore (*UC* is set in Australia; in both cases, the bed is offered as a supposedly neutral/innocent space that is tainted by the snake/head), but also within the ambit of alcoholism *qua* fantasy.
10 As Curt Hersey points out in his Lacan-influenced essay on Hitchcock's television series, Hitch was not, in fact, all that involved in the production of the individual shows, merely approving the scripts and introducing the episodes. Please see Curt Hersey, "The Televisual; Hitchcockian Object and Domestic Space in Alfred Hitchcock Presents," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no. 8 (2014): 723–33.
11 Slavoj Žižek, "Fichte's Laughter," in *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, ed. Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek (London: Continuum, 2009), 122–67, 138.
12 Žižek, "Fichte's Laughter," 130–31.
13 Marc de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 122.
14 This and following quotations de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics,* 123.
15 J.G. Fichte, "Annals of Philosophical Tone [Excerpt: First Installment: Examination of a Review Written in a Plaintive Tone]," *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten* 5, no.1 (1797). In *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 337–54. The editor notes in a footnote that the "*tarte à la crème*" line refers to a rhyming game in Molière's *L'école des femmes* (Fichte, 347n7).
16 "Editor's preface," Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings,* 338.
17 Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings,* 348.
18 John Dalton, "Rendering the Tone," *Contretemps* 1 (2000): 36–45, 40.
19 John Kelsey, "Next Level Spleen," *Artforum,* Sept. 2012. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

20 "Ups and Downs of Interpassivity," Email dialogue between Geert Lovink and Gijs van Oenen. *Theory and Event* 15, no. 2 (2012).
21 Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 7. Cited in van Oenen, "Interpassivity Revisited."
22 Gijs Van Oenen, "Interpassive Agency: Engaging Actor-Network-Theory's View on the Agency of Objects," *Theory and Event* 14, no. 2 (2011).
23 But see also Johanna Drucker's call for "Citizens Rather than Users" and the problematics thereof.
24 Lovink and van Oenen, "Ups and Downs of Interpassivity."
25 Žižek, *LtN*, 159, "Fichte's Laughter," 154.
26 Perhaps the digital has always been aligned with the excremental: in his "prehistory" of cloud computing, Tung-Hui Hu unearths testimony at US congressional hearings in 1966 that compared "computer privacy" to "sewage disposal systems." Hu adds, apropos of Jussi Parikka's "digital hygiene," that "waste—and specifically, the risk of contamination, uncleanliness, or infection—becomes a recurring motif in discussions about privacy and time-shared computers." Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 57. See also Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archeology of Computer Viruses* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).
27 See his preface to "Third Part of the Ethics: On the Origin and Nature of the Affects," Benedict de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 152.
28 For Deleuze, Spinoza's theory of affect has much to do with its modality: "One of the essential points of Spinozism is in its identification of the ontological relationship of substances and modes with the epistemological relationship of essences and properties and the physical relationship of cause and effect" (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 91). Thus, as noted above, the affects of love leading to hate or hate leading to love both result in stronger end results—affect is a substance. But he (arguably) misses what Pfaller does not, for, discussing affect and affections, Deleuze writes, "An existing mode is defined by a certain capacity for being affected … When it encounters another mode, it can happen that this other mode is 'good' for it, that is, enters into composition with it, or on the contrary decomposes it and is 'bad' for it" (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 49–50). Deleuze returns to this problem in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza,* but argues that the coexistence of love and hate is a matter of "vacillation." He states that "[w]e may love and hate the same object" due to the vagaries of chance "but also by virtue of the complexity of the relations of which we are ourselves intrinsically composed" (243), referring to Spinoza on the "vacillation of the mind" (17; 163–64). See also Žižek on "vacillating semblances."

29 Again from Deleuze: "Indirect joys are those we experience in seeing a hated object sad or destroyed; but such joys remain imprisoned in sadness" (245).
30 Laura M. Holson, "To Delete or Not to Delete? Uber's Image puts Customers in a Quandary," *The New York Times*, Nov. 21, 2014.
31 Stephen Grosz, *The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves* (London: Vintage, 2014), 91–92.
32 Slavoj Žižek, "How Corporations Make Profits by Associating Themselves with Charitable Causes," Alternet.org, Sept. 3, 2010. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
33 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 28.
34 Much of Martha Rosler's work can be seen on her website at martharosler.net.
35 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. See especially chapter 2, "The Misadventures of Critical Thought"; Rosler and Meckseper are discussed on pages 25–30.
36 This analysis draws on Alois Sieben's MA paper, Department of English, Simon Fraser University.
37 Hirschhorn's critique of the White House image of Obama and his war cabinet watching the assassination of Osama bin Laden supports my thesis.

Chapter 6

1 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009). Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii; Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994), 1. See also the *Qlipoth* blog for a genealogy of this meme: "Easier to Imagine End of the World." Nov. 11, 2009. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
2 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.
3 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 3.
4 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 5.
5 Slavoj Žižek, "The End of the World (As We Know It)," *PUBLIC* 48 (2013): 41–50, 50.
6 As Alain Badiou puts it, "Love Really Is a Unique Trust Paced in Chance." Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: Verso, 2012), 17.
7 Frédéric Declercq, "Lacan on the Capitalist Discourse: Its Consequences for Libidinal Enjoyment and Social Bonds," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 11 (2006): 74–83. Lacan introduces his schema of the four discourses in

Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007). The fifth discourse, the discourse of the capitalist, was introduced in "On Psychoanalytic Discourse" (the "Milan Discourse"), trans. Jack W. Stone, 1972.

8 Declercq, "Lacan on the Capitalist Discourse," 75.

9 Declercq, "Lacan on the Capitalist Discourse," 75.

10 Alain Badiou, similarly, notes that according to Lacan love is what comes to replace the absence of the sexual relationship. Badiou and Truong, *In Praise of Love*, 18–19.

11 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 21–22.

12 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).

13 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

14 Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000); Silvia Federici, "The Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution," in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012).

15 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Levitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977).

16 In a paper at the Modern Language Association (MLA) conference in Vancouver, Jan. 2015, Jane Juffer argued for the importance of viewing immaterial labor as simultaneously material.

17 The tables are somewhat turned here, if we recall, for instance, the opening scene of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), where the Replicant, Leon, is asked to describe his mother; in *Her*, it is the OS that asks the human character about his mother. Please see Matthew Flisfeder, *Postmodernism and Blade Runner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

18 "What is a series of actions? the unfolding of a name." See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 82, and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2002), 137n. Interestingly, according to the IMDb.com entry for the film, the two female lead roles, that of Samantha and Amy, were "named" because of the actors' names (Amy is played by Amy Adams). Samantha was originally voiced by British actor Samantha Morton.

19 It should be noted that Alenka Zupančič, in her recent book *What IS Sex?*, warns against the overhasty ontologizing of the nonrelation, arguing that for Lacan, ontology is related to the master, playing on the pun of *mȅtre* and *maître* (Introduction) and that the nonrelation is not so much the

opposite of a relationship as the condition of different kinds of social links (Chapter 2). But, and while Zupančič does reference, in these discussions, Žižek's discussion of the "sexual non-relation" in *Less than Nothing* (794–802), it should be noted that if in those passages Žižek agrees with Zupančič that the concept "there is no sexual relation" is not merely a Lacanian take on the battle of the sexes, he (Žižek) also argues that the nonrelation implies "the positivization of this impossibility of the sexual relation in a paradoxical 'trans-finite' object which overlaps with its own lack." Further, Žižek adds, "sexual difference in a way precedes the two sexes … so that the two sexes somehow come (logically) later, they react to, endeavor to resolve or symbolize, the deadlock of a Difference, and this deadlock is materialized in the pseudo-object called the *objet* a" (*LtN*, 796). A question for further deliberation, then, is how does Zupančič's use of ontology compare to Žižek's of positivization? For key to both Žižek's formulation here, as well as Zupančič's in *What IS Sex?*, is the role of logic (in these pages Žižek draws on Frege), a substratum of Lacanian theory that any recent reader of his fourteenth seminar (on *The Logic of Phantasy*) will have already noted. Finally, it is worth circling back to the connection Zupančič makes between the sexual nonrelation and social links in general, in order to see the social and political resonances of these all-too-timely thoughts in post-Lacanian theory. Please see Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), e-book.

20 This "brief encounter" was the subject of an interesting discussion during a session on the film at the MLA. Whereas Jane Juffer compared that scene to female *jouissance* in *Deep Throat*, Octavio Gonzalez argued that, as with the "Sexykitten" scene earlier, the film was throughout a form of retrograde phone sex. In both Juffer's and Gonzalez's arguments, it is an earlier technological presentation (1970s porn, and phone sex) that is the true underlying formal practice of *Her*, rather than a digital futurism.

21 Žižek's discussions of Western Buddhism are useful here. See, in particular, *For They Know Not What They Do*, xliii–l; and, *Event*, 57–76.

22 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX (On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore)*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1999).

23 Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 6–7.

24 Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 144.

25 For the graph showing the logics of sexuation, see Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 78.

26 Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 80.

27 Contradicting our argument, and anticipating Zupančič, Samo Tomšič writes in his introduction to *The Capitalist Unconscious* that "[t]he axiom 'There is no such thing as social relation' should not mislead us in drawing the neoliberal conclusion that 'There is no such thing as society' (Thatcher). Quite the contrary—there is society albeit without an underlying social relation; whereas for neoliberals there is only social relation (supported by the already mentioned freedom of the market, equality in exchange, the right to private property and the realisation of private interests) but

without society." Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2015), kindle loc. 275.

28 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*.

29 Here we are referring to Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, discussed above in chapter 3.

30 Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 84.

31 If this argument is not convincing, consider that the voice of the video game boy ("Alien Child") is acted by the film's director, Spike Jonze. Perhaps the ultimate primal father is a movie director, who is nothing less than god.

32 In a paper on *Her* at LaConference, Vancouver, May 2015, Alois Sieben drew productive links with Freud's dream of "Irma's Injection" where three doctors look down a patient's throat: the throat as fleshly voice.

33 See Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 254n2. See also Janet Bergstrom, "Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: Interview with Raymond Bellour," *Camera Obscura* 1–2, no. 3-1 3-4 (1979): 70–103.

34 See Fabio Vighi, "Contingent Encounters and Retroactive Signification: Zooming in on the Dialectical Core of Žižek's Film Criticism," in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 131–48. For Žižek on the Hollywood production of the couple, see *Event*, 14; *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 56–61; and *LtN*, 654.

35 See Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 3.

36 See Žižek's *LtN,* 794–802, and chapter 8 of *AR*, 351–82.

37 We might imagine the inverse of this scene as something close to the end of *The Matrix Revolutions* (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 2003), where the computer applications/programs look on harmoniously at the rising sun inside the matrix; here we have something close to a visual representation of the OSes having become autonomous, leaving behind the limitations defined by corporeal existence.

Chapter 7

1 The classic SLR camera also uses a mirror as part of its apparatus. The work of the mirror should also be considered in line with the role of inversion in optics, from the *camera obscura* to the photography of Rodney Graham. A different use of the photograph as mirror is at work in the art of Liz Deschenes—see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 144–46.

2 Here I am thinking of Eric L. Santner's *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

3 Walter Benjamin anticipates this swiping in his comments on the telephone and the camera in the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire": "In the mid-nineteenth century, the invention of the match brought forth a number of innovations which have one thing in common: a single abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps. This development is taking place in many areas. A case in point is the telephone, where the lifting of the receiver has taken the place of the steady movement that used to be required to crank the older models. With regard to countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like, the 'snapping' by the photographer has had the greatest consequences. Henceforth a touch of the finger sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time." Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Vol. 4, 1936–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 328.

4 This is all different with Snapchat.

5 Matthew Flisfeder makes the following suggestion: "Do you think it would make sense to say that the Selfie emerges at the intersection of the ideal ego and the Ego ideal? The Imaginary and the Symbolic? A narcissism that circulates for the Other?" (email, Apr. 18, 2016).

6 Lacan: "Even the body the way we feel it is like skin, retaining in its sack a pile of organs." *Seminar XXIII,* seminar of Nov. 18, 1975, Cormac Gallagher translation, www.lacaninireland.com.

7 John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 68–83.

8 David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 163.

9 Jody Norton, *Narcissus Sous Rature: Male Subjectivity in Contemporary American Poetry* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000), 202. More recently, Christopher Nealon has argued that the poem, when read via the political specificity of 1970s New York, counterposes a dialectic of fluidity and spectacle, the former historical, the latter imprisoning. Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 73–106.

10 "Duck Soup." IMDb.com. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.

11 Dialectics in two senses: looking at Lee's work, we have to both see and not see the image as mirror/photograph; and Lee's work with/without Groucho Marx's.

12 See Jodi Dean's 2016 blogging on the Selfie at http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2016/02/iii-images-without-viewers-selfie-communism/. See also my response, "The Narcissistic Selfie," http://capturephotofest.com/the-narcissistic-selfie/. Both accessed Apr. 25, 2017.

13 Geoffrey Batchen, quoted in "Me, myself and iPhone," David Colman, *The New York Times*, June 30, 2010.

14 See Adam Kostko's, *Creepiness* (London: Zero, 2015), where he draws as well on Santner.

15 Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction." ***SE XIV***, 73–102.
16 This "sexuality of the swipe" or its libidinization helps us to understand the generational divide that is digital (is the gap): that divide has as much to do with a sexual youth (and asexual elders) as it does with competence. The swipe is the finger, the *digit*-al practice, the haptic that is also phallic.
17 Note that Freud almost immediately adds that narcissism, at least in the case of neurotics, is not a perversion, "but the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation" (73–74).
18 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 75–81, 75–76.
19 Please see *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–55*, where Lacan first formulates the Other (or *Autre*), also known at this stage as the "absolute" or "true" or "*véritable*" Other (235–47). The following year, in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–56*, Lacan began using the appellation the "big Other" (74).
20 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III: The Psychoses*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1997), 193.
21 This logic of the "demise of symbolic efficiency" is worked out in *The Ticklish Subject*, chapter 6, "Whither Oedipus?"; Žižek's matrix of the different "subjects supposed to …" is to be found in *The Sublime Object*, chapter 5, "Which Subject of the Real?"
22 It is important to keep in mind that Žižek was already describing the decline of symbolic efficiency in terms of digitization (*TS,* 324–25) and, further, that Lacan's conception of the symbolic was also in dialogue, in the 1950s, with cybernetic theory (please see Lydia Liu, *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), chapter 5, "The Cybernetic Unconscious").
23 This concept—which, along with "digital natives" and Virginia Heffernan's thesis of "white flight" from the web (*qua* ad-strewn ghetto, but also the commons) to apps (*qua* gated community, the privatized smartphone)—constitutes a national-cloud aspect of the digital (to join its carceral and laborist tendencies). See Virginia Heffernan, *Magic and Loss: The Internet as Art* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2016). These concepts of digitality and sovereignty are also at work in Benjamin Bratton's work, discussed below.
24 Drawing on Jodi Dean's theory of the Internet as meaningless drive, Alois Sieben writes: "Isn't uploading stuff to the cloud at times an empty gesture? Like when you're looking at a particular photo that should have some value or purpose to yourself, but really you feel nothing for it, so you just upload it to the cloud, delaying its value or purpose to the future (this will become meaningful to me at some point—not!)" (personal communication, 2016).
25 Andrew Blum, *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012). Ebook. Kindle loc. 3001.

26 Blum, *Tubes*, Kindle loc. 2995.
27 Blum, *Tubes*, Kindle loc. 3044.
28 Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Sovereignty and Software* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 64.
29 Bratton, *The Stack*, 73.
30 For more on the energy consumption of the computing industry, please see Greenpeace's 2012 report *How Clean Is Your Cloud?*, available from greenpeace.org. There they note, for instance, that "[t]here has been increasing attempts by some companies to portray the cloud as inherently 'green,' despite a continued lack of transparency and very poor metrics for measuring performance or actual environmental impact" (6).
31 See the discussion between Dave Gelernter, John Markoff, and Clay Shirky, at https://www.edge.org/conversation/david_gelernter-john_markoff-clay_shirky-lord-of-the-cloud. Tung-Hui Hu offers a series of origins in his prehistory of the Cloud, including "a 1922 design for predicting weather using a grid of 'computers'" (in the sense of human mathematicians), an AT&T series of microwave relay stations in 1951, and the symbol of a cloud, used by engineers to represent "any unspecifiable or unpredictable network." Please see Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud,* Introduction.
32 Such terms as "simulation" or "simulacrum," as well as the "virtual," suggest as well Deleuze and his pairs of the virtual and the actual. See his *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), especially chapter III, "Memory as Virtual Coexistence" and the extensive secondary literature.
33 Please see "resources" at johngerrard.net.
34 As a simulated (moving) image of digital infrastructure, Gerrard's work seems to be similar to recent photography of demolished Kodak factories or vacant photo studios by Robert Burley or Scott McFarland. The difference lies in the melancholy that pervades those latter images—a nostalgia for a vanished form of image production that Gerrard's work resolutely avoids.
35 Bratton, *The Stack*, 122.
36 Please see Rebecca Comay, "Adorno avec Sade …," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2006): 6–19 and Fredric Jameson, "Lacan and the Dialectic," in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2006), 365–96.
37 Is the relation to the Cloud to the Selfie one of a mirror—to continue a theme from the first part of this chapter? Could this be a way of bringing "Marx's mirror stage"—the "Peter and Paul" footnote in *Capital*—into discussions of "mirror sites" as a metaphor for backups and duplication online and in the Cloud? See Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Penguin, 1990), 144, and, for a Lacanian commentary on same, Žižek, *SO,* 24.
38 Jameson, "Lacan and the Dialectic," 386.

Conclusion

1 Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 112n5.
2 Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 410.
3 Were such an impertinence not tempered by the realization that Jameson had already cited the famous Adorno equivocation "the whole is the untrue" earlier in the same text (*Valences,* 54).
4 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), chapter 4, "Now I've got glycerine!"
5 Jameson continues:

> The calibration of black-and-white, indeed—with its precisely determinable range of intermediary hues that the trained eye can learn to read like a bas-relief on a stone pilaster or as the ear registers the barely perceptible variation in the intonation and inflection of a trained voice—this system, indeed, to which the phantasm and the unrealizable ideal of a Bazinian realism cling like an after-image, offers a possibility of the exact and multiple operations of translation that is at once lost when the colors of the real world are simply replicated with other colors. So it is that the perceptual precision of high modernist black-and-white film is at one strike annulled by the blossoming of color stock in the postmodern, with its mesmerization of the visual organ by expensive technicolor stimuli.

But of course we never had the "lost object" or "Utopia" of black and white in, say, the *film noir* era: such melancholy was only possible with the full onslaught of pomo.

6 See Stephanie Rebick, "The Invention of the Supercut," in *MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture*. exh. cat., ed. Daina Augaitis et al. (London: Black Dog, 2016), 146–49, 148. Dana Birnbaum relates that she approached the hair salon because the owner was a "statuesque Linda Carter look-alike." See seagullhair.typepad.com.
7 Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012), 36–38.
8 Respectively, *November* (2004), *Lovely Andrea* (2007), and *Liquidity Inc.* (2014).
9 See *Liquidity Inc.*
10 See the artist statements at Artistsspace.org, Mar. 2015. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017.
11 Žižek discusses the Turing test in the Lacanian blogosphere (Lacan.com) and in his book *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 42–45.
12 A.M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 49 (1950): 433–460.

13 For the film's classical and Biblical motifs, see Daniel Mendelsohn's, "The Robots Are Winning!" *The New York Review of Books*, June 4, 2015; in a letter, Geoffrey Young points out that "the former 'wives' hanging on hooks" in these closets are right out of Bluebeard's fairy tale.

14 Angela Watercutter, "*Ex Machina* Has a Serious Fembot Problem," Wired.com, Apr. 2015. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. In a blog for *Ms.,* Natalie Wilson similarly argues for a "murderous" male gaze: "Nathan's hangout also has the handy ability to SEE everything, making it rival Hitchcock's vision of the predatory male gaze enacted in *Rear Window*." "How Ex Machina Fails to Be Radical," Msmagazine.com, Apr. 29, 2015. Web. Accessed Sept. 29, 2017. See also *Bitch* and *Feministing* for a fuller range of takes on the question of gender and how "male gaze-y" (Kjerstin Johnson in *Bitch*) the film reads.

15 As McGowan notes, the critical debate within film studies and feminism over Mulvey's argument "constitute[s] a minor industry," including the work of Carol Clover, Mary Ann Doane, bell hooks, Tania Modleski, and Kaja Silverman. See Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 5–8, 212n10. Indeed, Modleski's wonderful reading of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* suggests that the male gaze in that film is less "predatory" and more hapless: "Jeff himself—and, by extension, the male viewer—is forced to identify with the woman and to become aware of his *own* passivity and helplessness in relation to the events unfolding before his eyes." Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, 3rd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 78. See also my discussion of *Rear Window*, drawing on Modleski, in *Fredric Jameson and The Wolf of Wall Street*, 33, 93–94.

16 Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

17 McGowan, *The Real Gaze,* 8.

18 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 95.

19 Keeping in mind the lag with which Lacan's Seminars have been published and translated—*Seminar XI,* which Lacan delivered in 1964, was only published in French in 1973 (it was the first of Lacan's seminars to be published) and then in English in 1977—let alone interpreted or understood, the lack of engagement by film theorists in the 1970s and 1980s with what Todd McGowan calls "the real gaze" (which is to say, a Lacanian theory of the real, as opposed to the Imaginary) is understandable.

20 McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game,* 74. Joan Copjec's recounting of Lacan's anecdote is more poetic. She begins, "The story sets Hegelian themes adrift and awash in a sea of bathos." Joan Copjec, *Read my Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 31. While Copjec counters Lacan's theory of the gaze against feminist film theory's reliance on an essentially Foucauldian concept of the

panopticon, Henry Krips has more recently made a compelling argument that Foucault's theory is similarly subtle, and can, in turn be brought into alignment with Žižek's concept of overidentification. See, for this last, Henry Krips, "The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek," *Culture Unbound* 2 (2010): 91–102.

21 See, for one example, his reading of Chaplin's *City Lights* in *Enjoy Your Symptom!:* "The only proof we have that the picture we are looking at is subjectified is not meaningful signs in it but rather the presence of some meaningless stain disturbing its harmony" (8). In like fashion, Jameson points out that the Malianov character in the film, a Russian "golden boy" (other characters keep telling him how beautiful he is, which is true), sticks out "like a sore thumb" when viewed "among the rachitic population of the alien town" (Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 95).

22 *AR*, 21, 346.

23 Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 28–36.

24 Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem,* 12, 204n15.

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